

POLI 342: MODERN WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Session 10– The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill

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Session Overview

Welcome to session 10: The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill. John Stuart Mill was born on Rodney Street in the Pentonville area of London, the eldest son of the Scottish philosopher and historian James Mill and Harriet Burrow. John Stuart was educated by his father, with the support of Jeremy Bentham and Francis Place. He was given an extremely rigorous upbringing, and was deliberately shielded from association with children his own age other than his siblings. His father, a follower of Bentham and an adherent of associationism, had as an avowed aim to create a genius intellect that would carry on the cause of utilitarianism and its implementation after he and Bentham had died. Interestingly his father succeeded in producing an exciting philosopher in John Stuart Mill. In this session, we begin with his background, discuss his concept of liberty and outline his exposition on feminism. We further discuss the essence of individuality and the limits on the authority of the society. We also examine his concept of utilitarianism and finally examine one of the most interesting aspect of his thought; subjection of women.

Session outline

This session covers the following topics:

- The Background of J.S. Mill
- The Concept Liberty
- The Essence of Individuality
- The Concept of utilitarianism
- Mill on Subjection of Women.



TOPIC ONE

The Background of J.S. Mill

The Life of J.S. Mill

- John Stuart Mill was born on Rodney Street in the Pentonville area of London
- He was the eldest son of the Scottish philosopher and historian James Mill and Harriet Burrow.
- John Stuart was educated by his father, with assistance from Jeremy Bentham and Francis Place.
- He was given an extremely rigorous upbringing.
- His father, a follower of Bentham was determined to create a genius in him to follow his example
- Mill refused to study at the University of Oxford or the University of Cambridge, and followed his father to work for the East India Company until 1858.

The Life of J.S.Mill (cont'd)

- In 1851, Mill married Harriet Taylor after 21 years of an intimate friendship.
- Taylor was a significant influence on Mill's work and ideas during both friendship and marriage.
- His relationship with Harriet Taylor reinforced Mill's advocacy of women's rights especially on his work, *The Subjection of Women*.
- Seven years into their marriage, Taylor died in 1858 after developing severe lung congestion.

The Life of J.S.Mill (cont'd)

- Mill served as Lord Rector of the University of St. Andrews between 1865-68.
- During 1865-8, he was a Member of Parliament for City and Westminster^l and was often associated with the Liberal Party.
- In 1869 became the first person in Parliament to call for women to be given the right to vote.
- *On Representative Government*, Mill called for various reforms of Parliament and voting, especially proportional representation.

Works of Mill

- Mill's philosophy is based on an empiricist approach .
- Mill sees experience as the only true foundation of knowledge.
- Mill was influenced by utilitarianism, he nevertheless worked to protect the rights of individuals, particularly women
- The theme 'individual liberty' recurs throughout Mill's writings

Works of Mill (cont'd)

- Mill's thoughts on individual liberty led him to discover the power of emotion in human life and thought.
- His mind had been trained to think in a rigid and mechanical manner, leaving no room for emotion.
- Mill was a strong activist of socialist views, women's rights, political reforms, labor unions, and farm cooperatives.
- He died in Avignon, France, in 1873, where he is buried alongside his wife.



TOIC TWO

The Concept Liberty

The Essence of Liberty

- Mill's *On Liberty* addresses the nature and limits of the power that can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual.
- Mill rejects attempts, legal coercion or social pressure, to coerce people's opinions and behavior.
- His essay tries to show the positive effects of liberty on all people and on society as a whole.

The Harm Principle

- Mill develops further the harm principle.
- The harm principle holds that each individual has the right to act as he wants, so long as these actions do not harm others.
- If the action is self-regarding, then society has no right to intervene, even if it feels the actor is harming himself.
- He does argue, however, that individuals are prevented from doing lasting, serious harm to themselves or their property by the harm principle.

The Categories of Liberty

- To Mill, human liberty falls into three categories:
 1. There is the domain of the conscience, and liberty of individual thought and opinion.
 2. There is planning one's own life, and the liberty of tastes and pursuits.
 3. There is the liberty to unite with other consenting individuals for any purpose that does not harm others.

Further Exposition on Liberty

- Men progressed to a point where they wanted their leaders to be their servants
- It was thought that it was not necessary to limit this new kind of ruler's power, because he was accountable to the people
- When an actual democratic republic developed (The United States), it was realized that the people don't rule themselves.
- Rather, the people with power exercise it over those without power

Further Exposition on Liberty (cont'd)

- *On Liberty* involves an impassioned defense of free speech.
- Mill argues that free discourse is a necessary condition for intellectual and social progress.
- We can never be sure, he contends, that a silenced opinion does not contain some element of the truth

Further Exposition on Liberty (cont'd)

- Mill believed that “the struggle between *Liberty* and Authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history.”
- Liberty in antiquity was a “contest... between subjects, or some classes of subjects, and the government.”
- Mill defined "*social liberty*" as protection from "the tyranny of political rulers."
- Social liberty for Mill was to put limits on the ruler's power.
- He said that social liberty was “the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual”.
- However, limiting the power of government is not enough. "Society can and does execute its own mandates"
- John Stuart Mill's view on liberty, is that the individual ought be free to do as he wishes unless he harms others



TOPIC THREE

The Essence of Individuality

Individuality

- Mill observes that actions should not be as free as opinions
- Both actions and opinions must be limited when they would cause harm to others and be "a nuisance to other people".
- However, many of the reasons for respecting different opinions also apply to respecting actions
- Individuality is essential to the cultivation of the self.
- A basic problem that Mill sees with society is that individual spontaneity is not seen as essential to well-being

Individuality (cont'd)

- Individuality is valuable because people might learn something from the nonconformists.
- Dissenters may discover new goods, and keep alive existing goods.
- Mill writes that in early stages of society, it is possible that there could be too much individuality
- Liberty and individuality are essential to individual and social progress.
- Diversity allows us see the potential of combining the positive traits of different people.
- Forced conformity, in contrast, keeps people from learning from each other.

Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual

- Mill argues that society and the individual should each receive control over that part of human life that they particularly interested in.
- Society does not have an interest in those aspects of life that affect only the person acting.
- Mill says that he does not mean that people should not be allowed to point out what they see as faults in other people's behavior
- If an action only indirectly affects society without violating any fixed obligation, then "the inconvenience is one which society can afford to bear.



TOPIC FOUR

The Concept of utilitarianism

Utilitarianism Defined

- He wrote one of his most famous essays, *Utilitarianism*, in 1861.
- Utilitarianism is a moral and legal theory, with origins in classical philosophy that was famously propagated in the 18th and 19th centuries by Jeremy Bentham.
- Its general argument is that morality consists in ensuring greatest amount of happiness for the people.
- Mill defines utilitarianism as a theory based on the principle that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness."
- Mill defines happiness as pleasure and the absence of pain.

Mill on Attacks on Utilitarianism

- Mill argues that utilitarianism coincides with "natural" sentiments that originate from humans' social nature.
- Mill argues that having such a foundation is necessary in order for morality to have any legitimacy or significance
- Mill observes that many people misunderstand utilitarianism by interpreting utility as in opposition to pleasure. In reality, utility is defined as pleasure itself, and the absence of pain. M

Mill on Attacks on Utilitarianism (cont'd)

- To this Mill replies that human pleasures are much superior animalistic ones
- Mill contends, it is an "unquestionable fact" that, given equal access to all kinds of pleasures, people will prefer those that appeal to their "higher" faculties
- Mill argues that, it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.
- Mill presents the existence of pleasure and the absence of pain, as both the basis of desire, and foundation of morality.

Criticisms of Utilitarianism

- Happiness could not be the rational aim of human life, because it is unattainable.
- Most virtuous people in history are those who have renounced happiness.
- It leaves people "cold and sympathizing," as it is concerned solely with the consequences of people's actions, and not on the individuals as moral or immoral in themselves.
- It is too allowing, as underestimating the immoral tendencies of human nature.



TOPIC FIVE

Mill on Subjection of Women

The Foundation of Subjection of Women

- *The Subjection of Women* is the title of an essay written by John Stuart Mill in 1869
- At the time it was published in 1869, this essay was an affront to European conventional norms for the status of men and women.
- Just as in "*On Liberty*," Mill defends the emancipation of women on utilitarian grounds.
- Mill argued that the moral and intellectual advancement of humankind would result in greater happiness for everybody.

The Foundation of Subjection of Women (cont'd)

- In Mill's time a woman was generally subject to the whims of her husband and/or father.
- Mill recognized that he was going against the common views of society
- Mill saw that having effectively half the human race unable to contribute to society outside of the home as a hindrance to human development.

The Effect of Women Suppression

- The inequality between male and female was construed by Mill as one of the chief hindrances to human improvement
- Mill deploras the existing relations between the sexes for two main reasons.
 - First, the present system rests upon theory only
 - Second, the adoption of this system of inequality never was the result of deliberation.

The Dominance of Male over Female

- John Stuart Mill identifies three key factors that have sustained the dominance of the male over female in social relation.
- The natural attraction between the opposite sexes;
 - the wife's entire dependence on the husband;
 - the principal object of human pursuit, and
 - all objects of social ambitions can in general be sought or obtained by her only through them.

The Perception of the Family by Mill

- Mill's perception of the family is as follows:
 - (1) The family is a school of description in which the virtues of description, and also its vices are largely nourished;
 - (2) The family should be a real school of the virtues of freedom; and
 - (3) The family is a school of obedience for the children and a school of command for the parents.

The Perception of the Family by Mill (cont'd)

- Women are brought up to act as if they were weak, emotional, docile - a traditional prejudice.
- If we tried equality, we would see that there were benefits for individual women.
- Mill attacks marriage laws, which he likens to the slavery of women, "there remain no legal slaves, save the mistress of every house".
- Women must be allowed to vote to protect their own interests.
- He says that we simply don't know what women are capable of, because we have never let them try.
- If we tried equality, we would see that there were benefits for individual women.