

Liberty, Power, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Philosopher and utilitarian John Stuart Mill was chiefly concerned with happiness. To Mill, achieving the greatest happiness possible was the ultimate goal that everyone should be striving for. His hedonistic views identified not only the need to pursue happiness, but the inevitable complications that would arise with an entire society seeking their own versions of the objective. As a result, Mill proposed the necessity of having checks and balances in place in order to deter the majority from pressuring and overtaking the minority for the benefit of the majority's personal happiness. He was strongly opposed to oppression, arguing that society has a tendency to impose its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who are in dissent. Mill's stance against this oppression supports the existence of society's minority (correct or incorrect), stressing the importance of differing opinions.

Mill's solution to the problem of differing methods of self-seeking pleasure was the establishment of boundaries and restrictions outlined by his Harm Principle. He believed that reasonable individuals should be free to do what they want to a point in which they would harm others. This philosophy puts limits on legal and group control, allowing the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest amount of people. Mill's essay *On Liberty* explains, "The only part of the conduct of anyone for which he is amenable to society is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute"¹. This universal practice of tolerance is what maximizes happiness and the development and expression of individuality. According to Mill, individual actions don't matter when they outwardly do no harm.

Mill's argument in support of the individual pursuit of happiness initially appears like an advantageous strategy. It creates the image of an idealistic society where everyone gets what they

¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 688.

want, as long as they don't hurt anyone else. But Mill's glorification towards the idea of "happiness" is a flawed concept. Happiness is a fluid gray area used as an unspecific label for human desire. Mill speaks of it as an achievable goal, not the fleeting feeling that it really is. His basis for the validity of human behavior is constructed on something that is incredibly conditional. For example, if an individual spends their entire life devoted to pursuing and experiencing personal happiness, what have they accomplished? They have lived in a way that temporarily fulfills their constantly changing feelings of desire. There is no absolute benefit towards the individual, society, or an ultimate greater purpose. Yet Mill emphasizes this as the primary goal for which we based our limitations of authoritative power. Mill's argument is that this individualistic pursuit of a subjective feeling is so important, that it should be put on a pedestal and protected despite any countering evidence of absolute truth.

Regardless of whether or not Mill would agree with my opinions on the legitimacy of pursuing happiness as a life goal, he would immediately object to my suggestions of any absolute truth interfering with an individual's happiness. While I may argue that absolute truth trumps an individual's flawed perception of happiness, Mill would counter with the fact that despite the illegitimacy of that person's beliefs, they are still entitled to having those incorrect beliefs and exercise their own free will. Mill demonstrates this argument by saying, "the principle requires liberty of tastes and pursuits, of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character, of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow...even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong"². This speaks to the rights of us as humans with free will to make our own decisions, despite whether those decisions are correct. Absolute truth or not, governments have no right to force it upon anyone.

² Mill, 669.

Mill brings up an interesting point of discussion with the idea of personal choice. When discussing the rightful exercise of power, Mill says, “His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant”³. Even if I knew with absolute certainty that my own beliefs and judgments were correct, I would have no right imposing them on someone with incorrect beliefs. After considering this argument, I would have to agree. People are entitled to the freedom of choice and should not be coerced into alternative beliefs or actions as a result of majority flexing their power. For example, assume that one of the thousands of religions in the world is correct. Forcing others (exerting some kind of harm or unjust restrictions) to obey and follow that religion would remove the element of free will and turn the intended good motives into evil motives of power. Any response of submission by the oppressed would be one of fear and illegitimacy.

But despite these agreements with freedom and the restriction of authoritative power, Mill’s insistence that our primary goal in life is the pursuit of happiness is an empty and unsettling ambition. Claiming that happiness (pleasure) is the ultimate goal and motivation for behavior suggests that it is the standard for morality. If everyone has different values and opinions to what happiness is, then what is morality? Morality would become the product of an individual’s temporary desire for something, good or bad. If happiness is our greatest goal but has no concrete truth to support it, then we are pursuing something that is indefinable and unreachable. At the end of one’s life one will find that the goal to be happy was both achieved and unachieved a million times over. There is no lasting benefit, no greater purpose, and no definitive resolution to this endless pursuit that turns man inside out in search of something to relinquish the unquenchable thirst. It is only when we discover truth beyond ourselves and our selfish desires that we find a goal worth pursuing.

³ Mill, 668.

Bibliography

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863.