

Liberty through participation:

How Mill and Hobbes' views on liberty highlight the freedoms necessary for fair social  
prosperity

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John Stuart Mill wrote that “despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement and the means justified by actually effecting that end” (Mill “On Liberty” 10), echoing the despotic sentiments of Thomas Hobbes. In the establishment of a unified sovereignty, Hobbes posits “[t]he only way to erect such a common power [...] is to confer all their power and strength upon one man [...] that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will” (Hobbes “Leviathan” 109). The bearer of this absolute power over subjects is the ‘sovereign’ and Hobbes firmly believes that subjects “have no greater liberty in a *popular*, than in a *monarchical* state” (Hobbes “De Cive” 121). In drawing a consistent thread between these two philosophers on what liberty entails, one must first understand that “it is an easy thing, for men to be deceived, by the specious name of liberty” (Hobbes “Leviathan” 140). Because peace is conducive to prosperity, an ideal society must be a united one that works towards common good away from barbarism. Therefore, Mill and Hobbes’ notions on the kind of government that would allow for the greatest liberty as well as the end to which liberty serves its people is best realized in a democracy of collective rule. This is due to the notion that might does make right and there is nothing mightier than the ‘body politic’, which Jean-Jacques Rousseau describes as being “a moral and collective body composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly” (Rousseau 164). Because the body politic is more powerful than the sovereign, can self-regulate expression within its assembly and can self-actualize the utility of the people that comprise it, a participatory democracy is the most liberate form of government. In order to dismantle Hobbes’ argument to the contrary, one must first confront the nature of the sovereign.

Hobbes’ argument for a sovereign of absolute power is marred by the Machiavellian argument that once overthrown, the sovereign’s subjects will handily come to obey their new

sovereign because they are preconditioned to such obedience. Hobbes' absolute sovereign is exempt from the law while his subjects are expected "to lay down this right to all things, and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as [they] would allow other men against [themselves]" (Hobbes "Leviathan" 80). Although this social contract, popularly known as the Golden Rule, can be found in nearly every legal system, Hobbes notably breaks from his contemporaries in his belief that absolute power to command must be transferred by the body politic over to the sovereign, whose power is so absolute that the sovereign does not have to adhere to any contract made with their subjects. The sovereign's leadership cannot always be counted on to be the most competent; the only given in Hobbes' ideology is that the sovereign's singular vision helms the course of the body politic. While a singular vision is an essential agent for effective change and progress, as opposed to vision left undefined by conflicting voices, the sovereign's actions must be open to appreciable criticism or else liberty is not being practiced in full by the people. If there is no longer a shepherd in place to guide his flock, then only someone from the flock can be counted on to lead the flock since they have learned from their experience of being guided what path they should take. To think that the shepherd's post will forever remain an exclusive one is not only impractical, it denies the flock their potential to learn and evolve.

Mill insists that humans are progressive beings, meaning they have a tendency for actualization and would therefore compete for the right to rule as well as the realization of their ideal society. "Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter" (Mill 74), hence Mill's ideology of working from down up serving as stark contrast to Hobbes' ideology of working from the up down. Mill's utilitarian principles come into play in support of this when he recognizes the populous' duty to assemble a committee of representatives as opposed to Hobbes' suggestion

that the absolutist sovereign need not go challenged by the populous in order to rule effectively. Both systems are efficient insofar as their deliberative actions are made more swiftly than a direct democracy could ever allow for in conjunction with being cost-effective. Despite rule by an absolute sovereign being greater than a direct democracy for this reason, it is worse than a representative government because Hobbes' god-fearing system of subjects can never hope to ascend the ranks and become the paramount leader of their sovereignty. To not grant subjects total liberty in their capacity to seek and hold higher office in society is to stupefy one's masses. Hobbes' laws of nature reign supreme over all sovereigns and sovereignties, being "general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same" (Hobbes "Leviathan" 79). Laws are put into place in order to protect people from natural consequences and establish peace away from war, which threatens to degrade civilization back into the "nasty, brutish and short" (76) state of nature. Hobbes declares that the laws of nature are the only power greater than the sovereign so if society, as a participatory democracy, can set their own accord in order to stave off natural consequences then the body politic would be responsible for itself and the leaders it elects would represent the consensus' will. In the pursuit of liberty, which Hobbes defines as "the absence of external impediments" (79), one socially contracts themselves to the rest of their society as means of maintaining their own civil liberty.

Mill declared that "[a]s mankind improve[s], the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase: and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested" (Mill 42). Mill's advocacy of unrequited freedom of speech for the sake of uncovering truth through civil discourse is marred by his dismissal of violent speech. This is the

folly of Mill's libertarian perspective on freedom of speech because there is no objective measure of how violent speech is. So long as it is contained in words, a society of true liberty and freedom would allow total free expression. "[T]he only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" which is delivered through "physical force in the form of legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion" (Mill 9). This is known as 'the harm principle' and it is exercised in order to protect one another from harmful opposition. Moral coercion is exercised by a majority community against an expressed minority opinion and rightly so. However, Mill stipulates that physical force can be used against bearers of hate speech. The parameters that define hate speech are unclear and vary from culture to culture so that a minority opinion which would be considered harmful in one state may be a majority opinion in another state. Therefore, it is up to moral coercion to deal with harmful speech or else said society does not uphold liberty because there are conditional restrictions on freedom of speech and conditions vary greatly, often due to systemic bias which would favour one set of people over another. In order to separate the powers of the state's law from the powers of moral coercion so as to grant the greatest liberty to the citizens, Hobbes' 'right of nature' can be used as a determinant of whether or not physical force is necessary. The right of nature is "the liberty each man hath to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature" (Hobbes "Leviathan" 79). When one deliberately physically harms someone without consent, they are infringing on their victim's liberty. Their reason for harming their victim may have been influenced by somebody else's speech but their decision to inflict harm is entirely their own and thus open to retaliation. By markedly breaking the Golden Rule, one subjects themselves to the full force of their state's law and will be punished if they are found guilty of inflicting harm upon someone or cheating the

statute of limitations. Hobbes offers proof that speech cannot be defined as harm when he defines the 'author' of actions. Firstly, "[a] person is *he whose words or actions are considered either as his own, or as representing the words or actions of another man, or of any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether truly or by fiction*". Hobbes goes on to affirm that "the person is the *actor*, and he that owneth his words and actions is the *author*, in which case the actor acteth by authority" (101) meaning the actor would be aware of the actions they commit. Any degree of harmful action can be subject to prosecution and a subsequent penalty. If an action is claimed to be broadly influenced by the speech of another author as opposed to their express consent, then the action is entirely the responsibility of the actor. Any orders put upon the actor's will that are either bribery or extortion fall upon the author's responsibility, otherwise, the actor is fully responsible for their actions. Therefore, besides legitimate and direct threats, no actor can frame the influence of speech as just cause of inflicting harm upon someone in a society that upholds true liberty, which requires absolute freedom of speech.

Although speech is neither regulated nor punishable by law in a liberate society, action and interaction are regulated in order to enable the greatest liberty and protection for its productive masses. At a utilitarian level, the government must ensure that its masses have the opportunity to realize their ambitions whilst not favouring any one person over any other. The class structure of a society, and most every society has one, is fairest when based around how much one has contributed to their society – in every country this is measured in money. Money can be exchanged for various goods and services, making it the means with which one can provide for themselves in society. "He who cannot by his labour suffice for his own support has no claim to the privilege of helping himself to the money of others. By becoming dependent on the remaining members of the community for actual subsistence, he abdicates his claim to equal

rights with them in other respects. Those to whom he is indebted [...] may justly claim the exclusive management of those common concerns” (Mill “On Representative Government” 108). The society that supports this man is one that is built upon and elevated by “an intelligent following of custom, or even occasionally an intelligent deviation from custom [which is better] than a blind and simply mechanical adhesion to it” (Mill “On Liberty” 57). This is why society has middle-class wage earners and a higher class of those who transcend the middle-class to become great wage earners. They find a means, working within the bounds of state regulation, to earn more than the sort of consistently mediocre wage one would earn with entry-level employment. Those who self-actualize their ways of life are those that prove “[h]uman nature is not a machine to be built after a model” (56). Through intelligent deviation from custom, these people strive within the bounds of a well-regulated society. A nation is largely supported by a broad and efficient working class coalition while offering those who seek greater liberty the opportunity to freely pursue it. A balance between the classes does not need to be formed by government coercion – human nature has steadily upheld this balance for ages. The punishment for an ambitious person who fails to realise their ambition is their own financial collapse. A compassionate society, one that has transcended the brutish state of nature, must tend to its most distressed citizens. A society that upholds true liberty must eliminate poverty since “the grand sources [...] of human suffering are in a great degree [...] conquerable by human care and effort” (Mill “Utilitarianism” 15) and a society that cannot tend to its poor is clearly unable to expand liberty to its entire citizenry. Once the truly impoverished have been provided for, at the very least given the opportunity to become workers so that they may earn a living wage, then the matter of liberty becomes one for discussion as liberty, alongside all social philosophy, is a matter than only a privileged society can hope to critically engage in. While Hobbes’ absolute

sovereignty would keep its citizenry above the poverty line so that the subjects can healthily serve the sovereignty, it cannot allow for its subjects to strive and pursue liberty at the highest social degree which includes, most plainly, seeking the highest office in said society. Mill's utilitarian philosophy, which posits that "actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness" (7) upholds the notion of happiness as the primary goal of the collective and of the self simultaneously, after their survival is assured of course. Human pleasures are greater than pleasures that any other animal's capacity would allow them to have as a result of humanity's progressive nature. Mill unravels this notion when he states that "[a] being of higher faculties requires more to make him happy [...] and he can never wish to sink into what he feels to be a lower grade of existence" (9). Happiness, as pleasure with one's own condition, is the goal of everyone in every society, therefore the goal of every society. The most liberate society must be the happiest society as well as the most efficient society, meaning one whose people are able to work together best at achieving the highest sense of liberty and happiness through their utility. Mill "regard[s] utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (Mill "On Liberty" 10). Man's progressive interests will shape an actualized masses from which the most skilled leader to lead said masses will emerge. This leader would understand the conditional issues facing the liberty of their society better than any foreign agent intent on ruling said masses. The participatory democracy that elected their leader will thrive so long as the leader does not stoop to tyranny or corruption, in which case it is up to the very masses that elected the leader to dismantle their rule and install one that progresses their democracy's liberty. A system of check and balances, best realized in the form of a representative government as it is time efficient while effectively serving the will of the



representatives' constituency, will keep tyranny and corruption from disposing the democracy's liberty. A representative's will acts as a vital conduit between the say of people and their leader so that the liberty of the people is being assuredly upheld by the actions of the government.

Therefore a participatory government is the best system to uphold the liberty of the progressive masses because of the citizenry's democratic right to have their say in parliamentary matters heard. A progressive body politic whose utility has been actualized will assuredly know what is best for upholding their liberty as opposed to any sovereign, domestic or foreign, that may come into power, thus the need for the people's participation in government.

Upon considering the forgone study of Mill and Hobbes' notions of liberty, one can conclude that a participatory democracy is the best system of government in enabling liberty as it bolsters the full strength of its body politic as well as its capacity for self-regulation and the actualization of its utility. Liberty through utility means that the people are happiest doing what is best for themselves and the greater good. Every individual has a different sense of what this entails so if they are privileged to live in liberty then, through civil discourse, their individual sense of liberty can not only be uncovered ideologically – it can be made their reality.

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