

Protecting Individuals From Tyranny: Locke and Mill's Perspective

Mackenzie Simms

John Locke is a thinker that believed that individuals hold the most power in a political society. He believed that individuals are granted the right to life, liberty and property as natural rights and introduced the idea that a government should exist to support the people, not to control them. Locke believed that if individuals' natural rights are being infringed upon, individuals can use their power to rebel against tyrannical government. This idea is later echoed by John Stuart Mill, he writes that individuals should be able to behave however they choose where the law is silent, because this experimental behavior benefits society and prevents complacency that can lead to governmental tyranny. In this paper I will argue that John Stuart Mill would agree with John Locke's idea of a limited government because he believed that freedom of individuality and expression makes society grow stronger and prevents tyranny.

In the Second Treatise, John Locke describes what he views to be natural liberties that all individuals have at birth. In section six he writes, "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" (Locke 2013, 9). He continues to describe how he views man to live in a state of nature, free of a political society or laws that dictate man's actions and beliefs. To provide an example of the state of nature, if two men were existing in the same forest, neither would have to abide by the same rules. If one man believed that the best way to catch a fish was to stab it with a stick, and the other was catching more fish by creating a net-like object to hold them, neither man is required to do it the other man's way, regardless of what works the best. If the man with the net was proven to be more successful and catching more fish than the other, he still has no obligation to share his fish even if the man stabbing the fish with a stick was starting to starve due to his failures, because both men are equal in their opportunity in nature. According to Locke, in this scenario, there would never be a point where the starving man could poison the more successful man, because of his lack of successes. This is because of the belief that

regardless of societal laws or equality, all humans are born with liberties that shall not be infringed upon. If the starving man were to inflict harm on the successful man, the two would be entering a state of war, as Locke writes, there is harm done to another without justification, and there is no government action to be taken against the wrongful actor because there is no government (Locke 2013, 15). A state of war is unavoidable in nature, as Locke believed in nature, man spends a majority of his time protecting himself from war, and has no prospect of creating things or cultivating his mind. This is enough reason for Locke to believe that the government needs to exist so that individuals can exchange their natural rights in nature for protection of their liberties, lives, and property.

Locke views the idea of exchanging one's individual freedoms to join a political society as consent to be governed. In section twenty-two of the Second Treatise, Locke writes, "The liberty of man, in society, is to be under no other legislative power, but that established, by consent, in the common-wealth; nor under the dominion of any will, or restraint of any law, but what that legislative shall enact, according to the trust put in it" (Locke, 17). With this, he explains that an individual must give consent, or permission, to a ruling power in order for their rights to be protected under that ruling power. For example, if the successful fisherman were to be under constant attack from the starving man, his property and his life are in danger. The successful fisherman might find a tribe of other men that live in the forest. In order for the men in the tribe to help protect the fisherman from the starving man, he will have to give up his freedoms in nature to that group. If the tribe has a rule that all of the men in the tribe must share all of their fish with the entire tribe after each day, the successful fisherman would have to consent to this in order to be protected from the harm of the starving man. If he did consent, he would share his catches with the tribe and his life, liberties, and property would be protected

within that group, meaning that the fisherman would no longer have to worry about his being in danger from the starving man's attacks.

Locke believed that an individual has a right to rebel against a government that tries to have absolute power over individuals, as the government, in this case, would no longer be protecting an individual's liberty, property, or lives, and in return would be inflicting harm on that individual. In section seventeen he writes, "And hence it is, that he who attempts to get another man into his absolute power, does thereby put himself into a state of war with him" (Locke 2013, 14). For example, if the successful fisherman were sharing all of his catches with the tribe, but went hungry as the tribe leaders ate all of the fish, then the successful fisherman would have a clear right to rebel. In this case, the fisherman would enter a state of war with the tyrannical government and would no longer have to follow their rules about contributing all fish to the community, because the ruling body was not protecting his life, liberty, or property. Locke believed that individuals have this right to rebel against their government because it prevents tyranny and absolute power over a society, as the society is not safe in an environment where they are not protected. As he states in section 202, "where-ever law ends, tyranny begins" (Locke 2013, 103). This encapsulates his idea that without the explicit consent of the individuals within a society giving the government authority to make laws, individuals' rights are being infringed upon and their life, liberty, and property are no longer being protected.

John Stuart Mill believed that in a society, individuals are free to do as they please where the law is silent. In *On Liberty*, he writes, "The 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. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant" (Mill 2015, 13). This is called the harm principle, and it is Mill's idea that a person can behave and say what they want

without repercussions, as long as they are not inflicting harm on others. For example, if there was a snowy society in the mountains, people would be expected to dress in warm clothing, including coats, hats, gloves, and boots. If there was one individual in the society that stood in the town square every day and shared his ideas that walking around outside with wet hair and no hat improves his immune system, he would be allowed to do so. He might be combated with arguments on why this idea is incorrect from the majority, but if that man wants to walk outside with wet hair in the cold, that is his choice to do so. However, if this man was forcing his children to also walk outside with wet hair in the cold, and they were continuously getting sick from this behavior, the society would be forced to end his actions because he would then be inflicting harm on others. The harm principle builds off of John Locke's idea of limited government because it reinforces the idea that individuals should have their liberties protected by the government. They give consent to belong to a society, therefore they should be allowed to live their lives in any way that they choose within the bounds of laws in which they have consented to.

Mill believed that experiments with living cause society to grow and flourish because discourse brings all humans closer to truth. In *On Liberty*, he writes, "The human faculties of perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice" (Mill 2015, 57-58). Mill believed that a choice based on evidence must be made by individuals in a society, because it is the only way that we remain informed and avoid slipping into tyranny. To continue with the snowy society example, if a member of the society were to combat the man standing in the town square with wet hair's ideas by providing scientific evidence to prove him incorrect, the society as a whole would be free to form an opinion based on two schools of thought. The freedom to make an informed decision

keeps discourse alive between individuals, as many have differing opinions. If in the snowy society the wet haired man were to present his evidence to the community, and the opposers were able to present their evidence, the society as a whole could experiment and discover what they believe. Coming to conclusions on their own, individuals would form an opinion that, in arguing their opinions, reaffirms why they believe the way that they do. They have experimented, come to their own conclusions, and can defend their position. John Locke's idea of limited government agrees with this concept, as he emphasizes the important role that individuals play in society, through their mutuality in common-wealth. He understands that society cannot flourish and grow without this. Mill's points agree with Locke because through discourse and defending one's opinion, an individual may be presented with new evidence that they had not ever thought of before and because of the freedom to experiment exists, one can change their mind as much as they would like when new developments evolve with society.

Forming opinions based on evidence prevents tyranny of the majority. Mill explains his idea of tyranny of the majority in the introductory chapter of *On Liberty*. He says, "society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought to not meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld with such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself" (Mill 2015, 8). Here, Mill describes the weight that he believed society holds in making decisions and how government works. He believed that when individuals go along with ideas and practices because "it is just the way things have always been done", there is harm being done to the human race as a whole, in only taking others' ideas for truth without exploratory behaviors to discover individual truths. Mill warns against this idea, as

after time an individual may not even remember why they hold a belief, because they have never been faced with a challenged ideology. Without challenging ideas and experimenting with actions, societies are more susceptible to tyranny from a government because there is no one holding them and their practices in line. For example, if the government were to have a requirement that all people in the snowy society cannot exit their homes with wet hair without hats, then individuals might not ever understand why this behavior might be harmful, because they have never been allowed to experiment with the behaviors. Mill views this as dangerous, because he believed that a government should encourage and protect individual's rights to experiment and cultivate their minds to advance society. If the government intervenes too much in personal choice, then individuals become susceptible to whatever the ruling body believed to be true, which might not be true in every case. In the snowy society, if the wet hair man were to be correct about his theory, and the government had prevented his behavior, they would have been keeping everyone in the society from benefiting from his experiment. The autonomy to make choices keeps members in the society from blindly following leadership, which prevents tyranny. This builds off of Locke's idea that the government exists solely to protect life, liberty, and property, of the people in a society because preventing tyranny of the majority keeps society involved in their government, preventing absolute power to slip in under people's noses.

It is my belief that John Stuart Mill would agree with John Locke's idea of a limited government because he believed strongly in the idea of individuality in a society as a form of preventing tyranny. Mill believed that the only way to protect people against a tyrannical government is to stay informed in decisions being made in individual's lives. Behaving in a way that is experimental, figuring out truths through discourse and coming to conclusions about individual opinions is crucial to fighting back against an absolute ruler. Before Mill, Locke

introduced this idea through limited government. He believed that the government exists for the sole purpose of serving the people's interests. If the government is not protecting individuals' rights to life, liberty, and property, it is not serving the people and the people have a right to fight back. He argues that no rational individual would agree to absolute rulers, and because of this, he advocates for a participatory government where individuals are informed on the decisions being made that will impact their lives.

Bibliography

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