

Mill

Liberty Mill was as much concerned with the problems of society as was Bentham. The principle of the greatest happiness inevitably led all utilitarians to consider how the individual and the government should be related. Bentham had put his faith in democracy as the great cure for social evils inasmuch as in a democracy the interests of the rulers and the ruled are the same because the rulers are the ruled. But Mill did not have the same implicit faith in democracy that Bentham had. Although Mill agreed that democracy is the best form of government, he set forth in his essay *On Liberty* certain dangers inherent in the democratic form of government. Principally, he warned that the will of the people is most often the will of the majority, and it is entirely possible for the majority to oppress the minority. In addition, there is in a democracy the tyranny of opinion, a danger as great as oppression. Even in a democracy, therefore, it is necessary to set up safeguards against the forces that would deny men their free and full self-development. In this respect, in his concern to eliminate clear social evils, Mill reflected Bentham's desire for reform. But Mill was particularly concerned to preserve liberty by setting limits to the actions of government.

Mill argued that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightly exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." There is, of course, a legitimate role for government, but,

said Mill, no government should interfere with its subjects (1) when the action can be done better by private persons; (2) when, although the government could possibly do the action better than private individuals, it is desirable for the individuals to do it for their development and education; and (3) when there is danger that too much power will unnecessarily accrue to the government. Mill's argument for liberty was, therefore, an argument for individualism. Let each individual pursue his happiness in his own way. Even in the realm of ideas, men must be free to express their thoughts and beliefs, because truth is most quickly discovered when opportunity is given to refute falsehoods. Mill took the position that "there is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation." He assumed, however, that it is important that the truth be known, and his whole concept of liberty, unlike Bentham's, was conceived as the precondition for developing the full possibilities of human nature.

As he considered the ideal goal of man, Mill asked "what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best thing they can be?" But is it the function of government to make human beings the best thing they can be? Mill had a deep dislike for the totalitarian state even though he lived too soon to see its ugliest manifestations. When he set forth the limits beyond which the government must not go, Mill argued forcefully that a man must not, except to prevent harm, be subject to the power of government, and especially "his own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant."

Still, Mill had departed sufficiently from Bentham's version of utilitarianism to set in motion subtle forces that moved Mill from his clear individualism to tepid forms of collectivism. If he was concerned with quality instead of quantity in pleasures, and if this quality is based upon human beings' being "the best thing they can be," and, finally, if only those persons who have experienced the higher pleasures can know them, there is the natural urge for those who know these qualitatively higher pleasures to want others to have them also. But what is to be done if those who do not know and appreciate the higher values do not want them? It is not surprising that in this situation Mill advocated, for example, compulsory education, thereby reversing his earlier view that men must not interfere with the liberty of any member of mankind even for "his own good." It is most often in the name of man's good that the state moves into the area of man's freedom. What Mill said about liberty has particular relevance in the twentieth century, which has witnessed the encroachment of government upon the actions and thoughts of men everywhere. But the difficulties of stating utilitarianism as a consistent philosophy are nowhere better seen than in Mill's own attempts to defend its principle.