

# *Capitalism and Morality*

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## AN ANALYSIS OF J. S. MILL'S ARGUMENT FOR DEMOCRACY

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Societies for millennia have searched for an answer to the enduring problem: "Who should rule?" This question has been one of the central debates in political philosophy as well as in society in general because it is one that reaches every member of society: from the lowliest observer to the most important leaders in a community. One of the earliest solutions to this dilemma was posited by Plato in *The Republic*, where the idea of a benevolent dictator, a good despot, or a "philosopher king" is first conceived. Yet this attempt has been far from the last. Many other philosophers, from Aristotle to St. Thomas Aquinas and from Machiavelli to Karl Popper, have weighed in on this question and offered their own answers to solve this persistent debate.

One specific subset of this question has evolved into its own debate: whether a good despot is favorable to rule by the people. Two major voices have surfaced to personify this debate, with Plato advancing his philosopher-king and John Stuart Mill forwarding his own interpretation of democracy. Mill's argument against the philosopher-king has five major premises: three address the problem of the idea of the 'good despot' and absolute rule, and two consider how exercising political participation might benefit the welfare of society. These succeed both in exposing the inherent weaknesses of benevolent despotism and in supporting the advantages of democracy to society.

Mill's first criticism of the 'good despot' lies in what is expected of such a leader. For such a person to exist, he/she would have to be able to function perfectly and constantly in all aspects of government. Just as Plato says, such a despot appears to be, "[a man] blessed by grace, and godlike<sup>1</sup>;" no longer a man, but an omnipresent, omniscient, semi-divine being, capable of operating flawlessly for the good of society. Mill, however, points out to the reader that no such person could possibly exist. No such administrative and political perfection could be humanly possible. However, a supporter of the philosopher-king might argue that this is an unfair criticism since such perfection is not expected of democracy and that this criticism is beyond the scope: the debate is not which is perfect, but which is best. Surely, neither Mill nor any other supporter of democracy would say that it is a perfect system. They too would only judge it to be the best in a field of lesser systems, just as the supporters of Plato would judge their respective system. This objection fails to be valid, however, because although it is true that the debate is which system is better, that which is posited by each system is different. Plato's *Republic* does not simply argue that the philosopher-king is the best form of government, but that it is the perfect form of government coupled with the perfect society. Mill and others only argue that democracy is the best possible form of government, but not the perfect one. The promises of these opposing schools are different: Plato's is one of idealism and perfection, while Mill's is one of pragmatism and reality. As with

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<sup>1</sup> Plato. *Republic*. in Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Routledge: 1945.

many things idealistic, the philosopher-king fails to fulfill its own expectations and, in Mill's opinion, falls very far from it.

The possibility of absolute rule implies negative effects to society as well. If people have no place to voice their will or take part in deciding their own destiny, the community might grow disinterested and passive in their relationship with their government. Mill believes this is problematic for society because history, as he sees it, has shown that more democratic societies like those of Athens, Rome, Venice, Holland, and the United States, have more 'energetic, and 'developed' societies as well as more 'go ahead characters' not seen in more totalitarian societies such as those in East Asia<sup>2</sup>. This comparison does not necessarily hold under modern scrutiny with the rise of such totalitarian regimes as the People's Republic of China, which despite its undemocratic nature has become one of the world's top geopolitical powers. Yet, this criticism might fail to cover a deeper problem of passivity; it might lead to a level of moral deficiency as well. Mill says, "Wherever the sphere of action of human beings is artificially circumscribed, their sentiments are narrowed and dwarfed in proportion."<sup>3</sup> Here, Mill fears that a loss of ability, and thus activity, leads to a society losing its sense of communal responsibility and social justice. In their passivity, people might be less inclined to believe that they have any responsibility to society since society has ceased to have any rights or purpose under absolute authority. Mill even posits that religion becomes stunted under such absolute power. Religion, as a possible source of moral knowledge, ceases to have a social aspect; the human person begins to only have a spiritual relationship with the divine rather than a tripartite relationship between himself/herself, the divine, and other people. As such, one's religious concerns become ones of private salvation with no concern for others.

Mill, moreover, claims that further dangers can emerge over time from passivity, especially when power changes hands from one despot to one not as benevolent as the previous. If such a scenario were to occur, the society might not have the ability or even will to overthrow such a dictator. Mill's example of such a scenario describes the succession of the tyrannical Tiberius after his benevolent step-father Augustus of ancient Rome. However, one could argue such an example of succession can happen in the opposite order, where a tyrannical dictator could be followed by a good despot. Karl Popper sheds light on this problem. The dilemma, Popper believes, is not in what kind of despot is followed by another, but what kind of person does the office of despot attract or into what it changes a person. In *the Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper argues that the office of despot is a naturally corrupting one, like Gyges' Ring in the *Republic*. In the conclusion of chapter eight Popper states, "we must face the fact that behind of the sovereignty of the philosopher kings stands the quest for power... and if we fortify ourselves ...then we may cease to find it so terrifying."<sup>4</sup> The power is one that is intrinsically corrupting and attracts those of an already malevolent nature.

The two last premises that Mill utilizes to discredit the idea of the philosopher-king and validate his own conception of democracy focus mainly on society itself. The first of these arguments from Mill states that social progress can only be accomplished through its own abilities and faculties. Furthermore, any such progress must have two specific intentions to truly accomplish this goal: self-protection and self-dependence. Not only do these two aspects aim to cure the problem of passivity, but Mill finds them reflected in already existing independent societies. On such communities, Mill says, "Through the joint influence of these two principles[self-protection and self-dependence], all free communities have both been more exempt from social injustice and crime, and have attained more brilliant prosperity, than any others, or than they themselves after they lost their freedom."<sup>5</sup> Yet, this has a prescriptive aspect as well as one that reinforces Mill's previous arguments for having as much of society involved as possible. For a

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<sup>2</sup> Mill, John Stuart. *Considerations on Representative Government*. Chapter 3, Section 1, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Routledge:1945, 164.

<sup>5</sup> Mill, John Stuart. *Consideration on Representative Government*. Chapter 3, Section 2, p. 2.

society to be self-protecting and self-reliant, as much of that society as possible must contribute to make it so. Therefore, just as Mill thought that having as many people involved in the political process reaches closer to discovering all of society's interests, having as many people as possible contribute to society's attempts at progress make the effort even more efficient and likely.

The second of Mill's last two premises holds that society's voice is the most efficient method of best serving its interests. Again, this relates to attempts to have the most people possible involved in the political process so that as much of society as possible can benefit from the process. Mill sees this as the only safeguard to ensure that all members of society's interests are taken into account. As Mill says, there is no guaranteed reason that, for example, the British Parliament or any other governing body will act in the interests of any given group in society unless those in that governing body are responsible to that group. Popper's central concept, which holds that if desired a society ought to be able to remove its elected officials without violent revolution<sup>6</sup>, supports Mill's position here by reinforcing that all elected officials' have a responsibility to their electorate. On the contrary, a detractor of democracy might argue that simply because society's general will points to one thing, it does not necessarily mean that the object of society's will is in society's best interests. For example, a community might want to designate a local highway a toll road even though a study has shown that such a toll will cause less people to use the highway and thus hurt the economy of the community. A supporter of the philosopher-king would take this as a prime example of how society's will and society's interests might be entirely opposite goals. Popper's objections to the philosopher-king once again aids in reinforcing Mill's position of democracy. As Mill believes that only society itself can best voice its own will and interests, Popper states that no one has such knowledge of the good of society. The possibility of knowing what exactly is best for all of society is, to Popper, an incalculable thought that no person could be capable of knowing. This also relates to how the idea of the 'good despot' is either inhuman or impossible. Furthermore, no example can entirely include all the variables in any situation so that a perfectly or entirely 'right' solution could never be deduced. Instead, the only intelligible information society or its elected officials truly have to aid in making a decision is the people's will freely voiced to their elected government. Furthermore, any possible attempt at find a 'right' or 'correct' answer can best be found with a group rather than an individual, as shown by Condorcet's Jury Theorem. This theory shows that when groups come to a conclusion together by a majority, they more often achieve a correct solution to the problem. This kind of simple democratic activity has also been observed in animal populations as well<sup>7</sup>.

Together, these five premises form Mill's argument that invalidates the theory that a benevolent, good despot can truly form the basis of a successful government and that demonstrates that such a dictator would also be detrimental to society at large. Mill's attempt stands to exemplify the virtues and safeguards of democracy to the alternative of the good despot. This solution, although one of many debated over millennia, prevails to be one of the most important and successful answers to the question: "Who should rule?"

## Notes

1. Plato. *Republic*. in Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Routledge: 1945.
2. Mill, John Stuart. *Considerations on Representative Government*. Chapter 3, Section 1, p. 2.
3. Ibid. p. 2.
4. Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Routledge:1945, 164.
5. Mill, John Stuart. *Consideration on Representative Government*. Chapter 3, Section 2, p. 2.
6. Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Routledge. 1945, 141.
7. C. List 'Democracy in Animal Groups.' *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*. 2004. 168-169.

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<sup>6</sup> Popper, Karl. *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Routledge. 1945, 141.

<sup>7</sup> C. List 'Democracy in Animal Groups.' *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*. 2004. 168-169.

