

# Assess the view that the functions of the state should be minimal

Everyone has their own views on liberty and certain philosophers believe that, in order to be free, the state should have little interference in our lives. This is according to the principle of negative freedom. Advocates of negative freedom, such as John Stuart Mill, John Rawls and Peter Kropotkin, believe that we should be free to do as we wish (although, for J.S Mill this is within the limitations of the harm principle) and that it is not necessary for the state to intervene in our day to day lives.

J.S Mill asserts that there is a struggle between authority and liberty and he outlines this in his book "On Liberty". He says that the state needs to be controlled by the liberty of the people as, without a limit to the authority of the state, it is a dangerous weapon and can lead to tyranny. However, he believes that full liberty of the people would lead to "tyranny of the majority", which is when the majority of citizens follow an idea that is not necessarily correct and can end up ruining society. J.S Mill considers tyranny of the majority worse than tyranny of the state and he believes that there is only one legitimate reason for the exercise of power over individuals, and this is: "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others". Additionally, he says that children, the mentally impaired or the disabled are allowed to be interfered with beyond the harm principle as they could harm themselves accidentally and so they cannot have full liberty. He also does not believe that criminals have the right to liberty as they had abused their right in the past and can therefore be interfered with. In essence, J.S Mill believes that the state can only interfere to protect the people and should not interfere with the private sphere.

John Rawls believes that the state's first duty with its people is to respect their right to liberty and to let them live life how they want to, as we are naturally capable of rational thought. (In opposition to utilitarian principles) he gives priority to the right over the good. What he means by this is that the first duty of the liberal state is to defend the individual's basic civil liberties and that the loss of freedom for some can never be made right by a greater good shared by others. He believes that the state can only introduce laws if they enforce justice and they should work towards equality. Essentially, Rawls considers that state intervention should be minimal as humans can think rationally without the help of the state and would only need the interference of the state when their liberty needs to be defended.

Peter Kropotkin is completely against the state and does not believe that the functions of the state should exist at all. He says: "Either the State for ever, crushing individual and local life, taking over in all fields of human activity, bringing with it its wars and its domestic struggles for power, its palace revolutions which only replace one tyrant by another, and inevitably at the end of this development there is ... death! Or the destruction of States, and

new life starting again in thousands of centres on the principle of the lively initiative of the individual and groups and that of free agreement. The choice lies with you!"

With minimal, or even no intervention from the state, how are we to know what is truly best for us as a society? Rawls believes that we would know what is best for ourselves as we are rational and forward thinking beings; J.S Mill seems to state that as long as we are not to harm each other our society should be fine and Kropotkin suggests that the state corrupts everything in society and we are best without it. Is the state really that bad or is it just the idea of abolishing the hierarchy that appeals to those who agree with the principle of negative freedom?

In contrast to negative freedom, some philosophers believe that it is completely necessary for the state to intervene wherever possible. This is the principle of positive freedom which is freedom to an extent but the state can interfere in the lives of individuals because it encourages personal development, social standards, values, etc. Advocates of this principle include John Locke, Plato and Thomas Hobbes.

Locke, for example, believed that the relationship between the state and its citizens took the form of a contract, in which the people agreed to give up certain freedoms under the state of nature in exchange for order and protection provided by the state, this was exercised according to the rule of law. However, if tyranny of the state was to occur it loses its side of the contract and therefore the contract becomes invalid. The citizens then not only have the right to overthrow the state, but have the ability to revolt and replace it.

Intervention of the state has proved, as it does in our current democracy, to be successful. With the interference of the state we are ensured of security and welfare. However, many are aware of unjust incidents that happen due to corrupt states (South Africa under apartheid, for example) which are probably why many turn to the principle of negative freedom. However, freedom from the state does not necessarily mean that we are guaranteed from moral evils, which is why I believe that the view of negative freedom is slightly naïve.

In conclusion, although the idea of a free society with minimal to no intervention from the state sounds peaceful, it is not as easily achieved as it sounds. We must take into account that everyone has their own views on what would be best for society and many will act in their own self-interest. Without a state to properly guide us all, we would be lost and would most probably end up ruining society as we know it. I believe the functions of the state should be significantly large as I would agree with the principle of positive freedom; the encouragement of personal development, social standards and values are important for us to grow as intellectual and moral beings, without these we would grow ignorant and possibly head into a devolution of intelligence.