

Compare and contrast the philosophical contributions Nietzsche and Mill make to our understanding of political and social tyranny.

Both philosophers, Nietzsche and Mill make contrasting and similar contributions to our understanding of the two terms. I intend explore how each philosopher does this and the differences and similarities between their two philosophies.

Before comparing and contrasting the contributions of both Nietzsche and Mill to our understanding of political and social tyranny, it is important to define exactly what these terms mean, and to distinguish between the two. Political tyranny on the one hand is the imposition of positive liberty by a tyrant to an individual or a collective group of individuals. That is, a situation where a certain way of life is dictated to citizens through the presence of obstacles, barriers or constraints. If we lived in a politically tyrannical society, we would be living under the control of a dictator, ruled by a single governing body. Furthermore, the pressure for an individual to conform to these “rules” can be seen as a result of ones fear of public disapproval - a recognised form of social tyranny.

Philosopher John Stewart Mill, rigorously educated by his philosopher father James Mill, began making contributions to politics and philosophy from the early 1830s, when he wrote profusely on such political and philosophical matters. He was greatly influenced by the works of Jeremy Bentham and his interested in Utilitarianism.

Mill’s book, “On Liberty” published in 1859 and written with his wife, saw Mill move away from the Utilitarian notion that individual liberty was necessary for economic and government efficiency and advanced the classical defence of individual freedom as a value in itself. It advocated moral and economic freedom of individuals from the state. His basic argument is simple: liberty from political and social tyranny is good because it allows for new and improved ideas to evolve and good because liberty forever puts old ideas to the test. - His ideas were and still are enormously influential and the ideas presented remain the basis of much political thought.

In “On Liberty” Mill refers to tyrannical societies of the past where liberty meant protection from the tyranny of political rulers. They consisted of a governing One or a governing tribe, who derived their authority from inheritance or conquest. (NZ) To prevent the weaker members of society from being preyed upon by “innumerable vultures” it was thought that there should be an “animal of prey” stronger than the rest. - The aim being to set limits to the power of the tyrant.

With this came a time where, as human affairs progressed, what was wanted was that rulers should be identified with the people, and that their interests should be the interests of the whole nation. This, Mill refers to as “the tyranny of the majority” which was held in “dread” (and commonly still is.) At this point, Mill is suggesting that majority rule itself could become a tyranny and that the suppression of minorities by the majority should be taken as a serious threat to a fair and just society. Mill claims that “society as a whole can issue wrong mandates and practice a tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression.” He argues therefore that protection against political tyranny is not enough: there also needs to be protection from social tyranny or “the tyranny of prevailing opinion” the latter being harder to achieve protection from.

Mill saw that this kind of political tyranny could prevent the development of individualistic behavior. Such tyrannies could work in two ways: through the adoption of laws which operate against idiosyncratic, non conforming or dissenting individuals. Or, through the power or pressure of public opinion, (which is notoriously prone to error, superstition or tradition.) Hence Mill argued that public opinion should not be a law that everyone should

conform to, and that the individual should have protection of the law against the prevailing sentiments of society. - Essentially, we each need freedom to develop our individuality.

So for Mill, the central problem is therefore to establish the legitimate extent to which the state can interfere in the affairs of individuals whilst maintaining acceptable levels of individuality. Mill's answer is clear and is demonstrated through his "Harm Principle" which states that "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 sufficient warrant." -So Mill is referring to not just any harm, but specifically physical harm. If a person is harmed then his or her sovereignty over self no longer exists because sovereignty is after all the foundational position of power; this is Mill's justification of the harm principle. Children and those who cannot take care of themselves are allowed to be interfered with beyond the harm principle as they may well harm themselves unintentionally; such children and those who cannot take care of themselves do not, and cannot, have sovereignty over self.

Applying Mill's Harm Principle strictly to current law would therefore remove "paternalistic" laws. For example there would be no reason to prohibit the laws prohibiting suicide, or drug taking or the wearing of seatbelts or crash helmets. From this perspective, laws that attempt to control such self regarding actions are wrong. They stunt the possibilities for individual development; the state should not be like an over protective parent, as for Mill, this does nothing but prevent the development of fully mature adults.

Mill's argument primarily questions what is the rightful limit to the sovereignty of the individual over himself? And how much of human life should be assigned to individuality, and how much to society? Mill says, to individuality should belong the part of life in which the individual is interested: to society, the part which chiefly interests society. Essentially, what are the limits of the law and what are the abilities of the individual?

Evidently for Mill, the idea that the state should be involved in "self regarding" actions is entirely wrong. The individual must be allowed maximum freedom of choice in matters that are to do with personal choice. His assertion reflects his own strong commitment to the idea of individual liberty and the belief that "free individuals" develop into more fully formed human beings. His arguments essentially reflect a strong belief in human reasoning and the ability for all of us to develop into mature autonomous individuals. Mill's approach is therefore libertarian in that he saw the confining controlling state as a danger: whereas a society populated with free thinking individuals is a mature and successful society.

Specifically referring to social tyranny, Mill states that "though society is not founded on a contract, everyone who receives the protection of society owes a return for the benefit" - meaning, if you conform to society, or public opinion, you will receive protection, i.e. you will not be condemned by society.

- Mill furthermore claims that it would be a great misunderstanding to suppose that this doctrine is one of selfish indifference about the well being of others. - There is indeed a need for an increase in the exertion of promoting the good of others, but Mill feels this can be done without physically or mentally punishing those who behave in a way that people don't agree with. - "Benevolence can find other instrument than whips and scourges, either of the literal or metaphorical sort"

So, if a person shows "rashness, obstinacy or self conceit" or pursues "animal pleasures" at the expense of those of feeling and intellect, it is expected that they will be lowered in the opinion of others. But, Mill makes it clear that we are not bound to seek the society of such an individual. - We have a right to avoid it, and a right to caution others against the individual. "If he displeases us, we may express our distaste: but we shall not feel called upon to make his life uncomfortable" - So if an individual has made a bad choice, we shouldn't condemn them further. - "If he has spoiled his life by mismanagement, we shall not for that reason desire to spoil it further"

At this point, Mill makes a clear distinction between the part of a person's life which concerns only himself and that which concerns others. He questions how the conduct of a member of society can be a matter of indifference to the rest of society, "no person is entirely isolated." If he damages his property, he does harm to those who derived support from it, or if he deteriorates his bodily faculties, he becomes a burden on others. So even if his actions do no direct harm to others, he is never the less detrimental by example.

As a liberalist, Mill stresses the importance of the individual and freedom. In a liberal sense, freedom means individual freedom. You are at "liberty" to do as you wish, there are no constraints upon how you choose to live your life, you are able, unhindered by tradition or inherited position to achieve your full potential. This idea opposes the characteristic of political tyranny - i.e. the imposition of positive freedom; restriction and barriers.

As Isaiah Berlin explained, negative and positive liberty are not merely two distinct kinds of liberty; they can be seen as rival, incompatible interpretations of a single political ideal. There are different ways to define liberty within a society. Isaiah Berlin talks about the two different types.

Berlin agrees with the idea of negative liberty and thinks the purpose of government is not to show any visions of life; rather, it is to give them freedom to find out for themselves what the good life is. Berlin supposes that there should be a small government that will protect everyone's individual rights. In a society where negative liberty is prevalent problems begin to arise when you begin to worry about government and not your private life. Negative liberty also allows everyone to have a sphere of rights. You are also able to become what you want and you have more self-control, because there is no pressure to conform to the "norm" of the community in order to keep the society running smoothly.

Rousseau, an advocate for positive liberty thinks that self-mastery is necessary for us as individuals and says that we should want to be the masters of our own life. Positive liberty is, "Wishing to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside." By participating in your government and thinking for yourself you can achieve self mastery. By having political self-mastery you are free to form a society which forms your values, which leads to democracy.

Mill, as a liberalist, believes there ought to be a minimum area of personal freedom which on no account can be violated. Mill says, "If this boundary is overstepped, the individual will find himself in an area too narrow for even that minimum development of his natural faculties which alone makes it possible to pursue, and even conceive, the various ends which men hold good or right or sacred." Mill says there must a certain amount of personal freedom so that you grow as an individual, so therefore, there needs to be a distinction between private life and public authority. 'Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows'; the liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others. In this type of society some people are held back for the betterment of others. The idea that for every person on top there must be someone below them must be accepted.

The other philosopher in question, Frederic Nietzsche, German philosopher of the late 19th century challenged the foundations of traditional morality and Christianity. He believed in life, creativity, health, and the realities of the world we live in, rather than those situated in a world beyond.

Like Mill, Nietzsche wanted to replace old values with new ones. He wanted to move towards a new type of human being. - "The Uberman" In Nietzsche's writing, "Beyond Good and Evil" he speaks of the "new philosophers" - individuals of 'socio - intellectual status' who must pave the way forward for a new world. -

Who must rise above the confinements of political and social tyranny. Essentially, through asserting their "will to power." Nietzsche refers to these individuals as the aristocrats, the elites.

These “noble” men will assert their will to power. - An ability that will have been passed down from generations.

The new philosophers or “noble breed” will possess the “master morality” the morality of the aristocratic, that which makes values for others and sees itself as noble.

At this point, Nietzsche introduces the ‘notion of superiority’ - the idea that these “free spirits” or new philosophers will assume a place of superiority in the social and intellectual hierarchy over those who are confined by political and social tyranny. In several aphorisms, he emphasizes a higher type of man, one who believes and demands an order of rank and disdains democracy and equality. Those inferior individuals, he refers to as “the herd.” The herd succumb to social and political tyranny, and so are “slaves” to it - and they can not change. - It is not in their genes. It is ok for the herd to be confined by political and social tyranny, but not for the elites. - The elites must be the dominant force, not controlled by a force.

Nietzsche’s fundamental principle is “the will to power.” Nietzsche refers to it as “an essence of life.” For Nietzsche, the underlying driving force of change is will. All drives come from a will to power, which is; the drive for freedom and domination over other things. We see it in our daily lives; in every argument there is a striving force for mastery and victory; even in the hierarchical nature of organisations e.g. manager vs. worker, teacher vs. pupil, politicians, preachers and even in the sex act itself. But, for Nietzsche, political and social tyranny seeks to tame this primeval drive and to suppress it. It is the weak and the herd who let their desires and will be suppressed. It is the role and duty of the ‘new philosopher’ to cultivate it.

Nietzsche strongly attacks religion. Especially Christianity. For Nietzsche, religion is a modern manifestation of political and social tyranny. Religion seeks to suppress the will to power. He refers to religion as “an ongoing suicide of reason” and has similarities with Freud in that he thinks religion is a ‘neurosis’ or mental illness. “Wherever the religious neurosis has appeared on earth we find it tied to three dangerous dietary prescriptions: solitude, fasting and sexual abstinence.” So for Nietzsche, being a Christian, means denying ones desires, it means self sacrifice for the sake of God (whom he believes is dead) and showing pity and charity for others allegedly leads to the elevation of the weak-minded.

Nietzsche believes we shouldn’t show such charitable acts, or make unnatural sacrifices. Christians are the herd, because they follow such beliefs and live their lives by them. The herd are not in control of their lives, for they live by a set of principles that are not their own. Christianity as a form of tyranny takes over the individual. We self mutilate when we feel guilty. Nietzsche says we shouldn’t feel guilty, as its better to do something and experience it, taking from it what we will, rather than be told not to do it at all. Political and social tyranny does not give an individual the chance to do this and places restrictions upon the individual.

Like Mill, Nietzsche valued individualism above all else, but he saw that as a result of the acquiescence to social and political tyranny (e.g. religion) followed a “herd mentality” where everybody follows one another for fear of disapproval by public opinion, or in the case of religion, disapproval by God. The herd has ‘given up’ their will to political and social tyranny. And so are weak to their superiors, as reflected in their values.

But Nietzsche suggests that people want this. He refers to slaves wanting and accepting political and social tyranny, and relating to the modern manifestation of this through religion, it provides truth and certainty. The slave is led by a superior guide, and wants to be, because it is comforting. So hence, Nietzsche sees the Enlightenment or ‘age of reason’ as ‘enraging to the slave’ because it removes an ‘Absolute Truth’ i.e. God. So forth, the slaves have to find their own truths.

Both philosophers contribute from different stand points. Mill on one hand speaks from a liberalist perspective. Liberals see humans as essentially rational thinking creatures capable of making informed decisions and despises the kind of paternalistic controls of a political tyranny that characterised the previous feudal period. Where Nietzsche on the other hand comes from an elitist standpoint. So, for Nietzsche, the most “human” or natural of societies are those

based on aristocratic principles. Thus, societies with clear and very wide social class divides are the most appropriate of humanity. Clearly defined class distinctions that Nietzsche would have liked are the times of the Ancient Greeks, Romans, Feudalism and even aspects of Nazism. - Orders in which richness, excess, cruelty and sensuality were encouraged. This is where a major difference between Nietzsche's philosophy and Mill's becomes apparent. Mill criticises the political control of a tyrant on an individual's freedom, yet Nietzsche claims that these aristocrats are "living for themselves" The aristocrats have asserted their will to power over the people. He justifies this by saying that these societies are natural, because the will to power was exercised properly, by the powerful over the weak.

Both have similar views on the topic of religion, arguing that no longer should one set of religious truths be imposed on a population. To move forward, to progress, is to explore the world through the exercise of human reason and critical enquiry. For Nietzsche, we must continually question everything, for there is no absolute truth. We have to find our own truth. We do this by being individual, and not following a herd. For Mill, we are rational thinkers, and bases his theory on this view - that we will come to sensible conclusions.

Hence, both philosophers advocate maximising negative liberty as a necessary condition for human flourishing. With the freedom to be individual without the barriers or constraints of tyranny, we as a society and as individuals' progress and new ideas are formed. New values are made, replacing old ones. The Elitist vs. the Liberalist approach is where the two philosophers differ in attitudes. Taking into consideration a rejection of negative liberty, this could be used to pave the way for an alternative account.