

Was J.S. Mill Right to Claim that Suppressing an Opinion is 'Robbing Mankind'?

John Stuart Mill asserted that by suppression of any opinion that mankind was being 'robbed'. He based this claim upon several different reasons. The first was that when you suppress an opinion you are assuming that you are infallible which Mill claims is a very dangerous position to hold, Mill says that when an opinion is compelled to silence it may well be correct and so suppression of said opinion denies people of the opportunity to correct their own beliefs. Another reason put forward is that even if the opinion silenced is incorrect almost all opinions contain some portion of truth within them, and the only way to truly progress one's opinion towards overall truth is to take the different sections of truth from other opinions and use them to improve your own. Thus even an incorrect opinion can be highly useful and should not be silenced. Thirdly Mill pointed out that even if the prevailing opinion were completely correct when an opinion goes unchallenged and simply is accepted it often can become 'dead dogma', by which he meant that for most people it becomes simply a hollow phrase with no real meaning or feeling behind it. Only through constant challenging of one's beliefs, Mill claims, can the belief remain alive and keep its true meaning for people and only when this is true will people use the opinion to actually guide their actions. Due to these three main reasons Mill claims that the suppression of any opinion be it correct or incorrect, is 'robbing mankind' of their chance to amend, change or reinforce their own opinions.

One problem with this view is that whilst it does appear to be fairly comprehensive at first it paints a rather idealistic view of truth. Mill's argument assumes that there is an absolute external truth and that this is the ultimate aim of all opinion. If there is no truth outside of our beliefs or opinions then his second reason for the non-suppression of opinions is not tenable, as one opinion cannot be 'improved' by incorporating the truth from another opinion. In this case an opinion being suppressed does not 'rob' mankind, as it is not stealing from them the opportunity of anything. A problem with this argument is that it only discounts one of Mill's three points, leaving the other two still as valid. Since each of these points works on their own this argument would need to be combined with others in order to fully refute Mill's proposition. This is followed on by his assumption that the ultimate search is for overall truth. Nietzsche asserted that instead the search for 'truth' is to find the set of assertions which is most 'life preserving' or 'life enhancing' and that the ultimate external 'truth' of a statement only matters if it is involved through one of these points. If this is in fact the case then both first and second assertions are untenable because they both rely on truth being the overall aim, rather than whatever works best. However Mill would not agree with this assertion as he would argue that through utilitarianism a large part of the ultimate 'use' of an opinion is its truth and so to him even if Nietzsche's claim is the best way of searching for an opinion the truth of said opinion is a vital part within this.

There are also more general arguments against Mill's assertion of absolute free speech and revulsion to its denial. Can absolute free speech always be a good idea? There are statistics to show that, for example, there is a noticeable rise in racially motivated attacks when a BNP seat is held in a constituency. In these cases the attacks appear to be largely motivated by the free speech exercised by the political party, as the rise in racial attacks is not normally accompanied by a change in the makeup of the community. In this case it would appear that the use of free speech has caused attacks

on innocent people. It seems very difficult to justify claiming that suppressing an opinion that caused harm to others would be robbing humanity of anything. However one could say that for the BNP party politician to gain the seat there must have been a change in the thought of the community even if the actual people haven't and that it is in fact this change in thinking, potentially brought about by any number of issues, that causes the increase in racial attacks.

One example, which can be used to support Mill's belief, is that of Tiananmen Square. Whilst this would appear to be a victory of suppression over opinion it can in fact easily be seen the other way around. Through the people of China managing to express their opinion much of the world was awakened to the unhappiness within China and an iconic figure was created ('tank man'). The oppression of the Chinese people's opinions eventually led to the events at Tiananmen Square where estimates of the numbers of dead range from 200-300 (issued by the Chinese government) to 2000-3000 (from international sources), however the opinion has since just grown stronger. This obviously shows that the suppression of the opinion is harming the people who are willing to die to attempt to express it.

However it could be argued that these protestors destabilise the country and could potentially disrupt it enough that it fell into insurgency. From this point of view, extolled by the Chinese government, the act of the suppression of the opinion is for the greater good as it helps to keep the country stable and the citizens safe. Even if this causes them to be unhappy about the state of things it can be asserted that this is better because they are at least protected. In this case they are not being 'robbed' by having their opinion suppressed because it is being supplanted by something deemed to be more important and incompatible with the opinion.

In conclusion Mill's argument that suppressing an opinion is robbing mankind appears to be fairly stable however not necessarily exactly as he first put it forwards. For example Nietzsche's view that the best opinion is one that is most beneficial rather than necessarily true, appears to be a better blueprint for the search of opinions than an external 'truth'. However once this change to the semantics of Mill's initial assertion the argument looks to be a solid one.