

"Comparison of Rousseau's view of liberty with that of Mill's"

In his book *The Social Contract*, Rousseau thinks that what makes man free is the change from a state of nature to the civil society. However, in Mill's *On Liberty*, he thinks society is in fact threatening the individual, rather than providing freedom for it and it should be limited in order to protect the individual freedom. As can be seen from these two opposing views, Mill's and Rousseau's view of liberty differ from each other. This paper will explain these differences between their views of liberty.

Their views about the role of the individual will make the first comparison. Here is what Rousseau says about the role of the individual: "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will; and in a body we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole."¹ What can be understood from this sentence is that Rousseau is denying the role of individuality in society, since individuality threatens the maintenance of the whole and it is against the basic principle idea of the social contract. According to him, only the sovereign can decide what is a concern of the community. Rousseau's most extreme example of it is in his discussion about the right to life or death. In this example, Rousseau says that if a man, under the control of the sovereign, has agreed to become a citizen, he must be willing to die if that is the decision of the sovereign.

On the other hand, what Mill thinks is completely different. To him, ideas of Rousseau explained above makes an impossible concept of individual freedom. What he thinks is that unless the individual is threatening the safety of another individual, society has no right to interfere, even if the individual's action may endanger him. Therefore, for Mill, the decision concerning the right to live or die rests with the individual (unless his decision in any way endangers another individual), Mill makes it clear with this sentence: "Over himself, over his

¹*On the Social contract*, Book I, p.282

own body and mind, the individual is sovereign."² He also has an example about a man crossing an unsafe bridge. What is said in this example is that if a person was seen about to cross an unsafe bridge, no one would be entitled to prevent that person crossing unless there was no time to warn him. However, under the social contract, the security of the individual and with it the right to live and die, are in the hands of the sovereign. This sovereign for Rousseau is everyone who has agreed to the terms of the social contract. Therefore, if the sovereign asked him to cross the bridge, he would have no choice but to cross it.

One of the main principles of both the Social Contract and On Liberty is the regulation of society and for governments; it is executed by means of the law. In the Social Contract, the laws are the will of the sovereign, which is shown in the decisions of the *general will*.³ Rousseau believes that if people have chosen to be part of the social contract, then they will, as a body, always decide to pass laws, which are in the public interest. However, Mill completely refutes this idea that citizens will independently make good decisions. What he thinks instead is by not giving people the opportunity to hear the opinions of others; one may not give them the chance to hear an opinion that is better or truer than theirs. What is more, even if the different opinion appears to be wrong, at least that person will feel more confident that their opinion is right. Mill also says that unless man can refute an alternative opinion, he has no grounds for preferring his own opinion.

Another point is their differing views about human nature and their ability to do what is in the public interest. Rousseau thinks that man is essentially good-natured, and because he has alienated everything to the community, he has no private interests in the decisions made by the general will. Mill has no such faith in human nature, and its ability to do what is in the

² *On Liberty*, Introduction, p.14

³ It is the will of the sovereign that aims at the common good. Each individual has his own particular will that expresses what is best for him. The general will expresses what is best for the state as a whole.

public interest. Instead, Mill says the will of the people is too often simply a majority of the people seeking to suppress a part of their number. Rousseau counters this by saying: "...the general will is always right and always tends to the public utility"⁴ and adding that as civil society develops and exercises faculties, no man would want to risk losing this by breaking the social contract. However, Mill refutes this by saying there can be no such faith in the reasoning of man. He says that it is only by the cultivation of individuality that well-developed individuals are produced. For this to happen, Mill believes the individual must be allowed to hear every opinion, in order to decide what is the correct decision. He adds that even if these ideas appear corrupt or evil, they should still be heard, in order for the truth to be found. Here is the sentence: "Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action."⁵ On the other hand, Rousseau accepts that a private citizen may have an opinion different from that of the general will, but he does not accept that his opinion should be heard, rather, he says this man should be 'forced to be free', i.e. that he should be forced to do what the general will forces him to do, because the general will cannot be wrong. For Mill, this is an intolerable view of liberty: "If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing mankind".⁶ Mill thinks that any opinion should be heard, even if it is only to emphasize that the truth is indeed true.

Much of the essay so far has concentrated on where each view of liberty has differed and this last comparison is one place where both Rousseau and Mill seem to be in agreement and that is the notion of slavery. Both agree that there can be no such thing as legitimate slavery. Rousseau says that the 'right' of slavery is void because it cannot only be justified, but also senseless because it has no meaning. Similarly, Mill says: "The principle of freedom

⁴ *On the Social Contract*, Book II, p.284

⁵ *On Liberty*, Chp.II, p.24

⁶ *On Liberty*, Chp.II, p.21

cannot require that he should be free not to be free".⁷ So, regardless of their respective ideas of liberty, both accept that no man can voluntarily give his freedom to another man.

In conclusion, both Rousseau and Mill believe their work is the foundation for ensuring the freedom of man; however, they have different means of achieving it. For Rousseau, it is by the creation of a civil society, for Mill, it is by the freedom of the individual. For Rousseau, it is by the moral quality given to man by his being part of the social contract, for Mill, it is by the continuous questioning of opinions and constant searching of the truths. Rousseau relies on the good nature of man; Mill prefers to place his trust in the surety of conflicting opinions. But regardless of their differing views, both agree that liberty of man is the most important objective for mankind to aim for, and that slavery can never be acceptable where liberty is the basic principle of society.

⁷ *On Liberty*, Chp.V, p.114