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Abstract

John Stuart Mill is best known for his works on utilitarianism and a classical version of Liberalism. He was an advocate for placing minimal constraints on an individual's ability to make choices for themselves. In Consumer Theory, axiom 5 assumes that an individual will consume or experience their highest-ranked bundle (Morey, 18). This paper discusses whether Mill would have believed that an individual would be just as well off if they were to consume their highest-ranked bundle if the government were to choose that bundle for them instead of them making that choice for themselves.



To choose or not to choose

When looking for a method to increase the welfare of a particular group of people, there are many theories available for consideration. Some of them are deontological theories, like those based on theology, like The Ten Commandments. Some others believe that maximum welfare is achieved through Hedonism, which is a theory based on the idea that every episode of pleasure is intrinsically good for us, and every episode of pain is intrinsically bad. But, most economists use some version of Utilitarianism to determine whether an act is good or bad.



Utilitarianism judges an act or policy to be good solely on whether it succeeds in increasing the aggregate happiness (Morey, 147). Jeremy Bentham most notably developed this theory when he wrote *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, which was first published in

1789. A student of Bentham's, John Stuart Mill, wrote *Utilitarianism*, which is also one of the more recognized works in the field. Mill, however, also did a lot to develop the idea that the welfare of an individual is maximized when there are as few limitations on that individual's choices as possible. A question then arises, if a person were to experience whatever they would have chosen for themselves, but instead the choice was made for them, would Mill judge them to be just as well off, or worse? In other words, does Mill value choice for the sake for itself?

In Edward Morey's book *Choice, Happiness, and Ethics?*, he proposes a thought example and asks:

You can live in World X or World Y, in World X you choose, subject to your constraints, your highest-ranked bundle. In World Y, all is the same except the government forces you to consume the bundle of goods and services you chose in X: your eats and drinks are the same, as what you would have chosen, but you don't have the freedom to not eat and drink them (Morey, 158).

Mill would judge that a person would be better off in World X than world Y, however, there must be a distinction made. The distinction is between the judgment that Mill would hold about that individual and the judgment that Mill would make from the perspective of that individual.

From Mill's perspective on which world would be better for him personally, he would undoubtedly choose World X over World Y, because he places a large emphasis on ones ability to think for himself. When you have to make more choices, Mill would assume that more thought is required in determining ones course of action. So, if a person were to choose World Y, or even be indifferent to it,  would believe that the judgment that had been made was wrong. In



On Liberty Mill says that when something is received passively rather than actively, the mind is no longer required to be engaged (*On Liberty*, 39). As a result, he says this makes one's beliefs dull, and therefore, that they would lack the connection to the inner life of a human being that is consciousness. Mill talks how about accepting something hereditarily or based on trust, and not based on personal experience, causes a disconnect with a key component of being human. So, in World Y where the government makes the choice for you to consume a particular bundle, Mill would say you are worse off, regardless of the fact that you would have arrived at that same choice for yourself.

If Mill were asked if the individual in World Y were any worse off, from their own perspective, he would say that their judgment would likely be that they are not worse off. This is because Mill believes that people would often rather put the responsibility of choice onto others, so they do not have to make it for themselves. Mill says, "that simple minds, having been taught the obvious grounds of the truths inculcated on them, may trust to authority for the rest". What he is not intending to say here is that someone should be a skeptic and not trust any basic truths that are told to them, but that there should be a limit to the amount we rely on these trusted truths. This is because it is worth our time to engage in the processes of reaching some of these same determinations for ourselves, so that we can have a fuller understanding of what that truth may actually be. While it may not be the case that when the opportunity to choose is taken people will always choose not to think about what else could have been the case, Mill believes that people will likely not. Taking away choice is not the same and taking away the ability to think,  but it means the opportunity for meaningful thought won't be presented in as clear of a manner. Because the majority of people find it easier to trust the truths told to them by others, they are comfortable looking to authority to make choices for them that would otherwise require

a deeper level of contemplation than what they are willing to put forth. These authoritative figures do not only come in the form of government, but also those who hold high positions in the church, or those more highly respected in ones society in general, like academics.

One particular authoritative force Mill focuses on is a societal force, that is, the power of the opinion of the majority. Mill says that people often take what is self-evident or self-justifying to them to not just rules for themselves, but the rules by which all should abide. He says, "This universal illusion is one of the examples of the magical powers of custom", which he says is commonly mistaken to be of first nature when it is really one of second (*On Liberty*, 10). Mill proposes a worry that the customs of the people that act as the unwritten rules of a society will be then translated into the power of the government through law. The problem that arises as a result of this is that there will be further limitations to the choices that people are allowed to make for themselves. What is not being said here is that people should ignore customary guidelines that are within their best interest, but rather that an individual should have the right to not engage in those customs if they do not wish to. Customs such as driving on the right side of the road have a clear benefit in making roads safer, but attending church on Sunday morning should be the individual's choice. He describes this as an encroachment on individual rights by what starts as the tyranny of the majority then being able to operate through the acts of public authority (*On Liberty*, 9). For a good state of human affairs to be maintained, Mill says it is just as important to find where the limit is of how far the interference of collective opinion should be allowed to go, and successfully maintain that limit, as it is to protect the people against political despotism. What this means is that Mill finds it just as important to protect an individuals rights from the subliminal limitations on choice that act through the rules of custom, as it is to protect them from



the government. The individuals' rights that are being protected by doing this are their ability to make to choices for themselves.

A key factor in being able to respect the liberties of individuals to make their own choices is to make sure that all of those individuals are adequately educated. For this to work, Mill says that it is the obligation of the community to ensure that everyone has access to an education, and each member should be required to achieve meet a certain threshold of knowledge, which means they would be required to attend a certain amount of schooling. This is so that each person has the capacity to review whatever particular question they are presented with and make a choice based on their own experiences. In order for the teachers in the community to be able to help facilitate its members reaching this threshold, Mill says that everything must be free to be written or published (*On Liberty*, 37). By this what Mill is purporting to say is that Freedom of speech is a right that must be fully protected. Even if the speech or publication opposes the ideas that those in authoritative positions, like the government or church, are saying to be true, the individual should have the right to express their opposition. When an authoritative power decides on a question for others without letting them hear the contrary side, Mill says that they are committing what he calls the assumption of infallibility. They are taking away that persons option to make a choice for themselves by acting as if they themselves can't be wrong. But, Mill does not believe that this is a power one man should be able to hold over another.

Another component to the success of educating the community to be able to make their own choices, Mill says, is that parents should be required by law to ensure that their children attend school. This is clearly an occasion in which Mill agrees that the rights of an individual, in particular a parent's choice in whether or not their child receives schooling outside of the home,

are justified in being encroached on. This is because even if they do not find it in their own best interest to get their child to school, they are hurting that child's future ability to think for themselves, and thus hurting the community as a whole. When a child is only exposed to the ideas of his parents, the chance of them turning out to hold those same ideas is too high of a risk. This means that the choices they will then be inclined to make will just be a reflection of how their parents behaved. Mill says that the nature of a human being is not to be a machine built after a model, set out to do the work prescribed to it. Rather, he says that a person is meant to change over time like a tree, "which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" (*On Liberty*, 55). The reason that this development is so important to Mill is that it allows people to utilize their full capacity. He says allows that individual to interpret experiences in their own way and to find out for himself which of these experiences is applicable to his own life and character (*On Liberty*, 54). So, for a child to be able to make choices based on their own experiences and not just those of their parents, they need to be educated outside of the home. Mill's experience as a child, having Bentham as his primary educator, probably emphasized his opinion that education should come from more than one source. Mill would not say that it was a bad thing for the child to reach the same conclusion as their parents, just that they should reach that choice on their own.

The only times it seems clear that Mill would advocate limiting someone's choice is if they are somehow affecting someone else's ability to exercise their own choices. This seems to be consistent with the axioms presented in Choice Theory. The limitations would act as constraints on the available bundles. In World X, the individual has the ability to experience their highest ranked bundle based on their own choice. In World Y, the government is able to provide the same experience that the individual would have ranked highest for themselves, but the choice

was not theirs. Since this does not appear to be a circumstance in which that individual was somehow going to hinder another person's ability to exercise their ability to choose, Mill would say that people were more well off in World X than World Y. By drawing from ones own experiences, they are engaging in what Mill believes to be a vital component of human freedom and advancement. Whether the choice that person makes turns out to be correct is of less importance than the value derived from arriving at it. So choice can be good for the sake of itself.



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