127

Mill, Philosophical Tolerance and Tragic Choice

ENES KULENOVIĆ

Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb

Summary

This paper examines John Stuart Mill's idea of philosophical tolerance. The goal of this paper is to show that the role of philosophical tolerance, in the light of the idea of tragic choice, should be extended. Mill saw philosophical tolerance as a corrective tool by which we can enrich and correct our own ideas. Tragic choice, however, entails that certain ideas and values are mutually exclusive. When faced with such a choice, one can not use philosophical tolerance as a method of justifying one's own view, but as a tool to accept the loss and the sacrifice that has to be made.

Mailing address: Faculty of Political Science, Lepušićeva 6, HR 10000, Zagreb. *E-mail:* ekulenovic@email.htnet.hr

Introduction

In this paper I want to explore John Stuart Mill's notion of philosophical tolerance. The method of philosophical tolerance means taking ideas we initially disagree with and using them to enrich and correct our own thought. This method played a crucial role in Mill's intellectual development, culminating in his argument for freedom of thought and discussion, as presented in his essay "On Liberty". In his autobiography Mill is modest in praising his "own powers as original thinker", but he did think that his superiority to most of his contemporaries came from the "willingness and ability to learn from everybody" (Mill, 1971: 146). Even systems of thought completely opposed to his own – that of Coleridge, Carlyle or the German Idealist – had

something to offer him. Although he found them mostly erroneous, there were still certain truths to be learned from them.

Mill saw philosophical tolerance as a corrective tool. We should explore rival ideas to correct, change or affirm our own concepts. When in his autobiography Mill discusses his method in political philosophy he refers to a medieval allegory of two knights approaching a shield hanging from a tree from opposite directions. The first knight thinks the shield is black; the other thinks it is white. They begin to argue and then fight over the colour of the shield until a third knight shows up and shows them that one side of the shield is black and the other white (Mill, 1971: 98). In matters of philosophical ideas Mill, undoubtedly, saw himself as being the third knight.

I, however, want to suggest that the method of philosophical tolerance can and should be used as more than just a corrective tool. There are cases where two conflicting ideas or values necessarily exclude each other and there is no way we can take them both into account or achieve compromise between them. As a result, one of these ideas or values will have to be sacrificed. These are – as Isaiah Berlin called them – situations of tragic choice. It is not that philosophical tolerance is useless in such cases, rather its role should be extended. In situations of tragic choice philosophical tolerance can help us not only to recognize why a certain value is being sacrificed but also to accept the inevitability of such a choice. Because Mill thought we can use the utilitarian principle to resolve such tragic situations, he did not think of them as being tragic; hence, philosophical tolerance had only a corrective role for him. Yet, if I can show that utilitarianism cannot help us in situations of tragic choice I will also be able to defend the extended role philosophical tolerance can play.

In the first part of the paper I will analyse the notion of philosophical tolerance, the method of imagination and their connection to Mill's views on progress. In the second part, I will introduce the pluralist ideas of conflict of values and tragic choice. Also, I will investigate whether Mill's utilitarianism can give a convincing answer to situation of tragic choice. In conclusion I will return to the notion of philosophical tolerance and suggest a review of its scope in the light of the argument of tragic choice.

Philosophical Tolerance, Imagination and Progress

In his essay on Coleridge Mill introduced the notion of philosophical tolerance, by which he means the ability of taking opposing views from our own into account. There is a value in "agonistic modes of thought: which, it will one day be felt, are as necessary to one another in speculation, as mutually checking powers are in political constitution" (Mill, 1973:399). One has to use, what Mill calls, imagination – "the power by which one human being

enters into mind and circumstances of another" (Mill, 1973:354), to be able to enter "the modes of thought opposite to his own" (Mill, 1973:352). It is obvious why this power is essential for historians or anthropologists whose job is to describe and explain times long gone or foreign and strange cultures; but why would imagination be of such importance to a philosopher whose main concern is the question of truth? If our own view is true then the opposing view to ours is wrong and does not deserve much attention. Mill disagrees and gives a strong argument against this claim: first in his criticism of Bentham and latter in "On Liberty". When talking about Bentham Mill concludes that the greatest weakness of his thought was his lack of philosophical imagination. If we make general statements only by the limited knowledge of our own experience and the outward conduct of others, we will end up, in the best case scenario, with "half-truths" (a term that Mill takes from Coleridge). Bentham was talented in "accurate logic… of consistent application of his premises" (Mill, 1973:356). This talent is vital for a great philosopher, but it is not sufficient. Equally important is a power of imagination, otherwise our premises are always one-sided. It is for this reason that Mill says "when Bentham defends a principle that is wrong it is not because his conclusion is logically erroneous, but because he neglects some more important principle" (Mill, 1973:356). Bentham "failed in deriving light from other minds" (Mill, 1973:350) and never gave deserved attention to the notions of conscience, self-respect, honour, dignity or love of beauty, putting them all under the heading of general happiness.

Mill further explored the argument for philosophical tolerance in the essay "On Liberty" when he claimed that in issues of "morals, politics, religion, social relations… every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons" (Mill, 1993:104). It is not only our limited experience that makes us hold one-sided views – there is also the fact of human fallibility. Luckily, human beings can rectify their views not only through personal experience, but also through discussion with others. This is why we should follow the great ancient orators such as Cicero who studied the other side of argument with equal or even bigger dedication (Mill, 1993:105). Through imagination we try to go beyond the limited realm of personal experience, through discussion we consider conflicting ideas as they are presented by those who truly believe in them. This led Mill to conclude that :"the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of the subject, is by hearing what can be said about by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind… no wise men ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this; nor is it in the nature of human intellect to become wise in any other manner" (Mill, 1993: 88).

This idea is closely connected to Mill's understanding of progress. As Alan Ryan points out, Mill's notion of progress was not dealing with the improvement of national wealth and power, but the improvement of intellectual and moral qualities of human beings (Ryan, 1970:184). It is this kind of improvement that is characteristic of true progress – progress that can be achieved, first and foremost, through open discussion between conflicting views. One's personal progress, just as a progress in issues that Mill calls "concerns of life" is to be achieved by "the reconciling and combining of opposites" (Mill, 1993:115). Those people who are ready to hear the other side of the argument and to expand their experience by the power of imagination are both intellectually and morally richer for it.

However, we should not mistake Mill's notion of progress for being a kind of Hegelian dialectics relying on a teleological understanding of history. First, Mill never thought that progress leads us to some predestined goal, such as the realization of the Idea of Absolute Freedom. History is not scripted and if change is inevitable, progress is not. A period of human flourishing can be followed by a period of dogmatic uniformity and there is nothing, apart from human action, to ensure that this will not happen. Second, Hegel's dialectic scheme of argument (thesis), counter-argument (antithesis) and conclusion that accommodates both the argument and the counter-argument (synthesis) suggest there will come a day ("end of history", as Hegel called it) when all conflicts between competing ideas will be resolved. This is something that Mill never accepted. For him, the idea of an age in which there is consensus on all major philosophical or social issues was outlandish. It is not that we are never able to achieve agreement or establish what is true – after all, the core idea behind philosophical toleration is to get to the truth by avoiding one-sidedness and half-truths. Rather, technological and scientific progress, as well as always changing social circumstances, give birth to new problems to tackle and new ideas that might help us to better understand the world we are living in. Even those ideas that are universally accepted as being true have to be questioned from time to time if we do not want them to become dogmas. This is what Mill thought when he said how "both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post, as soon as there is no enemy in the field" (Mill, 1993: 110). For Mill, the idea of progress of society and personal improvement is unavoidably connected to the conflict of rival ideas. This also goes for the realm of politics where, as Mill noted in "Considerations on Representative Government": "no community has ever long continued progressive, but while a conflict was going on between the strongest power in community and some rival power… when the victory on one side was so complete as to put an end to a strife, and no other conflict took its place, first stagnation followed, and then decay" (Mill, 1993:290).

It is also important to note that when Mill talks about philosophical tolerance, he sees it as a method of enriching our own ideas and establishing truth. He does not advocate compromise between conflicting ideas just for the sake of caution or social peace. Mill condemns "English mind…shrinking from all extremes. But as this shrinking is rather an instinct of caution than a result of insight, it is too ready to satisfy itself with any medium, merely because it is a medium, and to acquiesce in a union of the disadvantages of both extremes instead of their advantages" (Mill, 1973:430). He does think that erroneous and superstitious beliefs should be abandoned and dismissed, but only as a result of an open discussion. Even here, philosophical tolerance can help us understand why people hold these kinds of beliefs.

A good example of the method of philosophical tolerance, one that Mill also wrote about, is that of Tocqueville's study of the nature of the democratic system in America. His *Democracy in America* is an attempt to prove that democracy should neither be glorified, nor dismissed. Although he valued equality and freedom above all, he did not fail to notice that an egalitarian and democratic society can have its ugly side in the form of the tyranny of majority and in domination of mediocrity, or how education might become significant not for its intrinsic value of self-development but because of its instrumental value of achieving economic success. Tocqueville studied the advantages and the possible disadvantages of democratic political system. I say "possible" because both Tocqueville and Mill believed that these disadvantages can be avoided if one analyses them carefully and tries to correct them. Awareness is the first step to avoid them, institutional reform (such as the checks-and-balances system with its division of legal and political power between the executive, the judicial and the legislative branches of government) is the second. Here, one should listen to what critics are saying, instead of just blindly following advocates of democracy who tend to forget about the disadvantages that the equality of conditions (for this is what Tocqueville meant when he talked about democracy) might bring. The point is that the shortcomings of democracy can be avoided, as Mill suggests in his review of *Democracy in America,* when he talks about "M. de Tocqueville's list of correctives to the inconveniences of Democracy" (Mill, 1965: 123).

Utilitarianism and Tragic Choice

As the example of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* shows, philosophical tolerance should not only apply to ideas, opinions and views, but also to values. Often ideas conflict because they imply conflicting values. It is because values such as liberty and equality or security and privacy do not go hand in hand that we are forced to try to make a compromise between them.

However, there are also conflicting values such as justice and mercy, where compromise is not possible. In this latter case we are faced with a tragic choice. Where a balance can be struck between competing values, we can achieve a compromise by partially sacrificing both of these values. Where different values are mutually exclusive we have to choose one of them at the expense of the other. The choice is tragic because whatever choice we make we have lost something valuable. Even if we feel certain that our choice was the right one, we are still left with a bitter taste of loss. Pluralist writers such as Isaiah Berlin, Bernard Williams and Steven Lukes warn us of the moral complexity of the world, in which tragic choice is sometimes inevitable: when equally rational but conflicting values clash it is often not possible to make a satisfactory equilibrium or compromise between them. As Berlin puts it: "if, as I believe, the ends of men are many and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social" (Berlin, 1969:169)

Such a tragic choice could be avoided, or at least its impact reduced, if we had a clearly established hierarchy of values. If there is a reference point or an ultimate value to which all other values can be measured to, we automatically know how to choose when two values conflict. If one of them is sacrificed for the other, at least we are sure that we made the right decision. For Mill, this reference point is the utility principle – the greatest happiness of the greatest number. The ultimate value is happiness – not personal happiness, but "greatest amount of happiness altogether" (Mill, 193:12). Mill does not deny that values can conflict, he acknowledges that different values are not always compatible and they will often clash. However, he does believe that moral conflicts can and should be resolved by the utility principle. In "Utilitarianism" he says that "if utility is the ultimate source of moral obligation, utility may be invoked to decide between… [different values] when their demands are incompatible" (Mill, 1993:27). The same goes for the competing notions of justice – when different notions of justice are in direct conflict "social utility alone can decide preference" as "from these confusions there is no other mode of extrication than the utilitarian" (Mill, 1993:61). There cannot be any true loss if we chose to act so as to achieve the ultimate end – the greatest happiness of the greatest number. If the end of all human action is happiness and avoidance of unhappiness, then values deserve to be called such as long as they help us to achieve this end. Values are then, ultimately, seen as a means to an end. For example, the reason why we call liberty a value is that liberty leads to personal flourishing, and personal flourishing leads to general happiness. Now, the choice between different means of achieving the same goal cannot be called tragic. As Berlin points out in the above quote, what makes a choice tragic and a conflict a true conflict is that different goals people strive for are not always compatible. How-

ever, Mill's view is that what we all try to achieve when acting rationally is happiness and therefore such conflicts as described by Berlin can be avoided, when we think in utilitarian terms. This is why the utilitarian view of resolving moral and political conflicts does not take into account the possibility of tragic choice.

Here we have to take into account Mill's response to the critics of utilitarianism who claim that there are other ends to human action except happiness, which again suggests that happiness cannot be an ultimate value against which all other values are measured. Mill goes on to discuss the possible tension between happiness and virtue (Mill, 1993: 37-39). It is obvious that men desire virtue and desire it for its own sake, not as a means of achieving something else. Mill claims that this is true, but this only means that attaining virtue has become an essential part of one's understanding of happiness. Virtue is, therefore, not a "means to happiness, but a part of … happiness" (Mill, 1993:38). The same goes for the love of money, fame or power. All of these values have been means of achieving happiness, but they can also become an inseparable part of one's happiness. As Mill says "happiness is not an abstract idea, but a concrete whole, and these are some of its parts" (Mill, 1993:39). This led Mill to a conclusion that "there is in reality nothing desired except happiness" (Mill, 1993:39).

This understanding of happiness raises two problems. First, happiness understood in such a broad sense cannot really be used as a reference point in resolving conflicts of values. If my notion of happiness can be something completely different from your notion of happiness, then it is not clear how we should resolve a conflict between our opposing notions. Let us say that an essential part of my understanding of happiness is money, while an essential part of your understanding of happiness is virtue (a notion that in itself can be understood in more than one way). How are we to determine whose understanding should carry more weight? Even in our personal choice we might be faced with two conflicting ideas of happiness, both of which seem reasonable and worth pursuing, but unfortunately mutually exclusive. If we resort to the utility principle that would only mean that the majority's understanding of happiness won over that of the minority's. One can use the utility principle to guide them in their choice, but that does not mean that something valuable has not been lost.

Alasdair MacIntyre pointed out this problem in *After Virtue* when he wrote that "the notion of human happiness is not a unitary, simple notion and cannot provide us with a criterion for making our key choices" (MacIntyre, 1981:63). MacIntyre acknowledges that Mill made an important step in his utilitarian theory by differentiating between the "higher" and the "lower" pleasures and in that way distanced himself from Bentham's purely quantitative understanding of notions of pleasure and happiness. However, even if

we know we should prefer the higher to the lower pleasures, this does not help in those cases when we have to choose between two or more lower pleasures or two or more higher pleasures. "To have understood the polymorphous character of pleasure and happiness", claims MacIntyre, "is of course to have rendered those concepts useless for utilitarian purposes" (MacIntyre, 1981:64). The same line of argument has been voiced by John Gray in the beginning remarks of *Mill on liberty: a defence* – "a major failing of Mill's argument is its neglect of the problems of the conflict of values in moral and political life and of the limited role that appeals to principle or theory can have in resolving such dilemmas" (Gray, 1983:18). He discusses the case of autonomy and security – these two values are connected as a certain amount of personal security is a precondition of any kind of autonomous action. However, when in extreme cases of natural disasters or wars general security is endangered, the autonomy of individuals might be sacrificed as a measure for raising the level of security. In such cases, autonomy and security are directly opposed. Gray presumes that Mill personally would give priority to autonomy, but there is nothing in Mill's utilitarianism that suggest that autonomy should be regarded higher in the hierarchy of values than security (Gray, 1983:126).

The second problem arises if we try to avoid the broad understanding of happiness and the kind of criticism that was presented by MacIntyre and Gray. This would mean that happiness has to be defined more narrowly. However, narrowly understood happiness cannot be a sort of umbrella value for all other values; it becomes just one of the many. In the cases where different values conflict, an appeal to general happiness is then as equally convincing as an appeal to some other value such as duty or virtue. Again, when faced with a moral dilemma, the utility principle might not even always be the best way to go about resolving it. This is obviously not what Mill had in mind. As we saw earlier, Mill was convinced that utilitarianism can provide a solution to conflicts of value.

This shows that utilitarianism does not have an answer to tragic choice. Happiness can be understood either as ultimate *telos* or just as one of the many values, but in both cases we are faced with a possibility of loss. I would like to use two examples to illustrate this argument, one from the private and one from the public sphere: Mill's relationship with Harriet Taylor before her husband's death, and the debate between Rousseau and the *philosophes* about the character of civilization. In his autobiography Mill does not hide the affection that existed between him and Harriet Taylor, almost from the moment they met. No doubt that Mrs. Taylor was faced with a choice of staying with her husband or leaving him to marry Mill. If we take Mill's account to be correct, they were not too worried about the opinion of others, but of discrediting and hurting Mr. Taylor – a "most upright, brave and honourable man" (Mill, 1971: 112). A choice had to be made between

two values – that of marital duty and that of love. Harriet Taylor's choice was a tragic one – she could marry the man she loved and hurt the man she cared for or stay with her husband and be with the man she loved only after her husband's death (given Mrs. Taylor's and Mill's moral character cheating on the husband was not a possibility). Her decision resulted in a loss – she had to wait for 21 years to marry the man she loved. Undoubtedly, had she decided differently and left her husband, she would have been faced again with a loss (of a different kind, but still a loss). Maybe she would have thought of herself as immoral or negligent of her duty towards the man she admired and cared for. Let us imagine that Mrs. Taylor behaved as a utilitarian and made a choice based on the happiness of all those affected by the consequence of her decision. It would be really hard to guess what her choice would have been without knowing exactly what her understanding of happiness was. Happiness can be envisaged in different enough ways to justify both possible alternatives.

The example that Mill uses to illustrate the importance of philosophical tolerance, both in the essay on Coleridge and in "On Liberty" is the debate on the value of civilization between Rousseau and the *philosophes*. The French *philosophes* praised all the achievements of modern civilization – art, philosophy, medicine, sciences, transportation and technology, destruction of superstitions and unfounded dogmas – all those accomplishments that contributed to lowering the level of human suffering. Rousseau fixed "his attention, not upon the value of these advantages, but upon the high price which is paid for them" (Mill, 1973:400). Rousseau talks about a loss of self-reliance, the rise of envy, the slavery to unnecessary wants, the dullness and monotony of the life of the average citizen, the praise of mediocrity at the expense of individual excellence, courage and energy. It is not important here whether Rousseau was right or not. It is enough to say that Mill thought that Rousseau was (at least partially) right in his belief in "the superior worth of simplicity of life" compared to the "demoralising effect of trammels and hypocrisies of artificial life" (Mill, 1993:115). Mill viewed Rousseau's criticism of the achievements of modern civilization in the same light as he saw Tocqueville's warnings about the possible disadvantages of democracy – as a collection of useful and insightful ideas that can help us reform and better the society in which we live. When talking about the debate between the *philosophes* and Rousseau he says "all that is positive in the opinions of either of them is true; and we see how easy it would be to choose one's path, if either half of the truth were the whole of it, and how great may be the difficulty of framing, as it is necessary to do, a set of practical maxims which combine both" (Mill, 1973:401).

This would mean that there is a way we can promote both the values of civilization of which the *philosophes* talked about and the values of uncorrupted and non-artificial life that Rousseau advocated. However, these val-

ues cannot go hand in hand and it is not clear how we would go about making compromise between them so as to ensure that all of them can equally flourish. The loss of the values of the noble savage is a price to pay for the benefits of civilization. This argument also reflects on the idea of progress – there is always a price to pay for progress. Even when progress is understood solely as an improvement in moral character, there are values which could contribute to such an improvement, as Rousseau himself suggested, that will have to be sacrificed for some other values. That is why we often find sympathy for the previous eras in history – not only because of some romantic notion of Golden Age gone by, but because we know that certain values have disappeared from our own lives and from the life of our community.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to argue that philosophical tolerance can be extended to be used as a tool for dealing with the tragic choice between conflicting ideas and values. Mill did not deal with the instances in which two conflicting ideas might be true or partially true but there is no consistent way in which we can accommodate them both. He believed that whatever element of truth can be found in a certain idea, this could be integrated with the rest of the truth. For him truth is two sided but these two sides can be made to fit together. He did not discuss what role philosophical tolerance could play when one is faced with tragic choices because he believed that the utilitarian principle can provide us with an adequate answer when we find ourselves faced with such choices. I have tried to show that utilitarianism cannot really provide us with such an answer.

One obvious objection against my argument is that when Mill discusses philosophical tolerance he talks only about ideas, not values. There is indeed an important difference between ideas and values: values necessarily need social institutions and practices to sustain them. It is because opposing institutions and practices often cannot co-exist in the same community that certain values have to be sacrificed for the good of others. The same cannot be said about ideas: competing ideas can co-exist without a need to sacrifice some of them for the sake of others. Even when synchronizing two conflicting ideas seems impossible, we do not have to dismiss one of them. Certainly, the existence of two ideas that both ring true but are mutually exclusive might make us sceptical about the validity of one or both of them. However, if the value pluralists are right and not all social goods can exist together, then the existence of such two conflicting ideas is logically coherent.

This objection is valid, but I do not think it puts my argument in question. First, philosophical tolerance can refer not only to conflicting ideas, but also to conflicting values because, as I have mentioned, specific ideas pro-

mote specific values. Second, my goal was to show that philosophical tolerance can have more than just a corrective role. Mill was right in thinking that it is often possible to make a compromise between conflicting values or ideas, a compromise that both enriches and broadens those values or ideas. However, this kind of corrective role of philosophical tolerance is just the first step. Philosophical tolerance can also help us when faced with tragic choice, where different ideas or values are mutually exclusive. Imagination and discussion can help us recognize what is lost and what is gained by promoting certain ideas or values. If pluralists are correct in assuming that there are rational and valid ideas and values that stand in irresolvable conflict with each other, then philosophical tolerance becomes an indispensable tool of accepting and dealing with the loss that such conflicts entail.

References

Berlin, Isaiah, 1969: *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, London

Gray, John, 1983: *Mill On Liberty: a Defence*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London

MacIntyre, Alasdair, 1981: *After Virtue*, Duckworth, London

Mill, John Stuart, 1993: Utilitarianism, in: Williams, Geraint (ed.), *John Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Considerations of Representative Government, Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, Everyman, London

Mill, John Stuart, 1993: On Liberty, in: Williams, Geraint (ed.), *John Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Considerations of Representative Government, Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, Everyman, London

Mill, John Stuart, 1993: Considerations of Representative Government, in: Williams, Geraint (ed.), *John Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Considerations of Representative Government, Remarks on Bentham's Philosophy*, Everyman, London

Mill, John Stuart, 1973: Bentham, in: *Dissertations and Discussions: vol. I*, Haskell House Publisher Ltd., New York

Mill, John Stuart, 1973: Coleridge, in: *Dissertations and Discussions: vol. I*, Haskell House Publisher Ltd., New York

Mill, John Stuart, 1971: *Autobiography*, Oxford University Press, London

Mill, John Stuart, 1965: M. de Tocqueville on Democracy in America, in: Schneewind, J. B. (ed.), *Mill's Ethical Writings*, Collier Books, New York

Ryan, Alan, 1970: *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, Macmillan, London