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Comparative analysis of Plato's and John Stuart Mill's approaches towards the notion of liberty

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ABSTRACT

Study towards the notion of liberty remains relevant at any time since the idea of freedom remains a basis of the contemporary democracies and other modern liberal political regimes. This article traces the differences between the two theoretical approaches towards the liberty: of the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato and the British economist and politician of the XIX century, John Stuart Mill. The research reveals common features of the concepts: while Plato can be considered to be a representative of the ancient philosophy with the peculiar comprehending of liberty notion, John Stuart Mill, adhering liberalist views, proposes the classical understanding of the concept. Moreover, the article will contribute to the distinguishing between the contemporary perception towards the freedom and the ideas of philosophers of the past. In addition, the research is based on the comparative analysis of the following criteria: the authors' attitude to the concept of liberty in general, views on the freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of the will, approaches to the political regimes, like tyranny and democracy, opinions about the necessity of customs, as well as about the issues of individuality, personal development, and the system of citizens' control.

Keywords: Plato; John Stuart Mill; liberty; freedom of expression; liberalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Starting from the ancient times, various philosophers and scholars around the globe were reflecting on the issue of liberty. With the advent of the first cities and states, this

question became more complicated, since it appeared utterly necessary to reveal the limits of freedom within the legal framework. Among such philosophers, Plato, born in Athens, approximately in 427 B. C., can be considered a pioneer, who dedicated his entire life to the contemplation of diverse philosophical issues. The most famous Plato's work is the *Dialogues*, which concerns almost the all aspects of human life and which examines the question of the individual liberty (Pater 2002). Especially, the dialogue *Republic* in detail describes political structure of the ideal state - *polis*, as well as determines the concept of freedom in the framework of such the society.

Furthermore, the other British philosopher, economist, and politician of the XIX century, John Stuart Mill was interested in the study of liberty. His views that advocated the concept of the absolute freedom have vastly contributed to the development of liberalism theory. Mill's essay *On Liberty* written in 1859 is completely dedicated to the analysis of liberty notion, as well as to the revealing of correlation between freedom and a particular individual, state, and the society (Capaldi 2004).

Due to the fact that J. S. Mill during a long period of life was engaged in the research of different theories about the liberty, which obviously included the works of ancient philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and so forth, his views were somehow influenced by their ideas (Fitzpatrick 2010). Hence, certain elements in Mill's approach may appear similar to the provisions of Ancient Greek philosophy. However, his ideas actually were focused on individuals' complete freedom, as well as on their independence from the society and state authorities. In comparison to Plato, who supported the idea of total control of the both, private and political life of citizens, Mill proposed to provide individuals with freedom of action, freedom of the will, freedom of expression, and so forth (Donner and Fumerton 2009).

In fact, the study towards the notion of liberty remains relevant at any time since such the concepts are seen as constituent parts of the contemporary democratic principles and the modern liberal political regimes. This article traces the differences between the two above-mentioned theoretical approaches towards the liberty, as well as to reveal common features of Plato's and Mill's concepts. While Plato can be considered to be a representative of the Greek ancient philosophy with the peculiar comprehending of liberty notion, John Stuart Mill, adhering liberalist views, proposes the classical understanding of the concept. Moreover, the article will contribute to the distinguishing between the contemporary perception towards the freedom and the ideas of philosophers of the past.

2. METHODS AND CRITERIA

Although, at the first glance, the approaches of Plato and Mill towards the liberty appear to be completely different, several corresponding provisions in the two concepts can be traced. The priority in the research will be given to the Comparative Analysis that is used to scrutinize and compare the approaches of the two philosophers. In order to identify and assess general characteristics of the theories, as well as their fundamental differences and similarities, the following **criteria** will be utilized: the authors' attitude to the concept of liberty in general, views on the freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of the will, approaches to the political regimes, like tyranny and democracy, opinions about the

necessity of customs, as well as about the issues of individuality, personal development, and the system of citizens' control.

3. RESULTS

3. 1. Freedom of an individual

On the one hand, J. S. Mill regards the individual liberty as a sphere of human life, which concerns solely a person, thereby, establishing a specific framework for the freedom. For example, if persons, who follow own opinion and objectives, act within this marked framework, they should be given the complete freedom of actions (Mill 1859/2001). In particular, Mill explains that the individual liberty comprises freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of the will, freedom to act jointly with other people, and so forth. Nevertheless, each of these freedoms can be implemented in the case when they do not inflict harm to the society and other individuals. Even if a person's actions cause disapproval or indignation on the part of the society without injuring particular individuals, they can be considered to be permissible. Moreover, members of the society cannot damage themselves on the grounds that, subsequently, it may negatively affect other people (Devigne 2006). Thus, it can be claimed that Mill maximally expanded the boundaries of individual liberty by establishing the sole above-mentioned exception and provided a person with the large scope of actions.

On the other hand, Plato considers the notion of human liberty within his pattern of the ideal state: he explains individual freedom and personal independence in terms of its utility to the whole society. In other words, a member of the *polis* can be considered a free person while acting in accordance with the objectives of the society, as well as for the benefit of a state in its entirety (Klosko 2006). In fact, Plato's human liberty is tied with the social division into classes, when each citizen is obliged to fulfill the defined functions. Since the *Republic* of Plato (380 B. C. /1907) describes the ideal state as the politically stable formation, the hierarchical society occupies an important place in the structure of the *polis*. According to the Greek philosopher, deliberate inequality and the established social hierarchy are the key to stability and justice due to the fact that people's distribution is implemented in accordance with their natural inclinations. Hence, liberty is defined not as the independence of an individual from the society, but as the intentional pursuit of virtue.

3. 2. Restrictions on liberty

Thereby, views of J. S. Mill and Plato towards the liberty are utterly different; however, in the both approaches the notion of freedom is limited. The former author restricts the liberty of an individual with the possibility of causing harm to other people, while the latter philosopher places freedom under the influence of natural talents and inclinations of a person. Moreover, Plato gives the priority to the political stability of the society, rather than to the satisfaction of its particular member; by contrast, Mill places the happiness of an individual in the center of his liberty concept. That is, it can be argued that the two authors not only possess discrepant views on the notion of individual freedom, but also the opinions on the interdependence between a person and a state are the exact opposite.

3. 2. 1. Freedom of expression

Furthermore, J. S. Mill contests that the suppression of opinion negatively affects the society, even if individuals accept this phenomenon as a norm. He argues that each of the convictions and ideas, which appears genuine from the initial consideration, must be permanently challenged in order to prove their validity. Mill explains that ‘presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation’ are extremely different issues (Mill 1859/2001, p. 31). Thereby, the freedom of speech and the freedom of expression are seen as the instruments of discovering the verity.

Moreover, when the public is confident in certain beliefs, it attempts to protect these ideas through state power. Besides, people in their intentions are guided not by the verity of such convictions, but by the value, which these beliefs have for the society. State authorities are able to apply the variety of protecting, as well as punishing measures agreed with the public opinion (Herring 2013). Mill claims that such an approach to the issue of verity justifies the suppression of opinion, as well as provides the opportunity to violate freedom of speech and freedom of expression on the part of a state. Indeed, only virtuous and highly intelligent individuals can challenge beliefs widely accepted within the society (Roshwald 2000).

By contrast, it can be stated that Plato denies freedom of expression in the model of his ideal state. Freedom of expression and freedom of speech, like freedom of will and liberty of an individual, in general, are subordinated to the human consciousness and should pursue the single goal, that is, to yield benefits to the whole *polis*. Especially, freedom of speech is mentioned in the description of democracy as one of the adverse political systems: a society where citizens are able to freely express themselves cannot ensure stability and prosperity to a state (Plato 380 B. C. /1907).

Furthermore, freedom of expression in the ideal state, as well as fine arts and literature are influenced by the ideology of the *polis*. Myths, old tales, and songs play a key role in the education of dignified citizens. In other words, if the meaning of narratives does not suit the framework of a proper behavior of an individual, they must be converted in compliance with the ideology. For instance, the Book II of Plato's *Republic* explains:

But stories like the chaining of Hera by her son, and the flinging of Hephaestus out of heaven for trying to take his mother's part when his father was beating her, and all those battles of the gods which are to be found in Homer, must be refused admittance into our state, whether they be allegorical or not. (Plato 380 B. C. /1907, p. 66)

Thereby, it is hardly possible to trace the genuine freedom of expression and freedom of speech in relation to the model of Plato's ideal state due to the fact that these notions are somehow subordinated to the policy and ideology of the *polis*.

3. 2. 2. Freedom of the will

In addition, Plato rejects the idea that in the ideal state individuals possess freedom of the will in the broader sense of this notion. In his early dialogue *Euthyphro*, Plato asserts that even gods are not completely free when making certain decisions, and that the divine power or nature determines their path. Therefore, the same law is applicable to human beings and

their individuality. Eventually, the pursuit of a virtue by people appears to be predestined, and individuals only discover such the aspirations in themselves, excluding the possibility of conscious choice.

Besides, Plato's dialogues clearly identify the dependence between the will and the reason. In other words, unlike the Mill's concept, a citizen of the *polis* is not capable of expressing freedom of the will making decisions independently; contrary, an individual is a subject of common behavioral principles accepted by the public (Burt 2001). Thus, on the one hand, J. S. Mill considers individual freedom the necessary aspect of social and personal well-being; on the other hand, Plato equates freedom of the will in its broader sense, as well as the general liberty of a *citizen* with the ignorance that is able to yield destruction to the ideal state. Also, the independent choice, according to Mill, develops the personality in human beings, while Plato emphasizes that a fate of an individual is initially predetermined.

3. 3. The necessity of customs and rituals

In addition, J. S. Mill in *On Liberty* considers the controversial question of traditions' necessity. On the one hand, customs and the respective rituals have to be taken into account, since they comprise valuable experience of past generations; on the other hand, it is not rational to consider traditions to be absolute verity and follow them purely. Moreover, at modern times, customs can be interpreted incorrectly and their meaning may occur distorted, while other rituals can appear inappropriate for the specific society or a group of people. Besides unquestioning adherence to customs cannot improve human personality due to the fact that individuals learn to anticipate, to analyze, to distinguish, and to judge solely when they make independent decisions (Devigne 2006).

The discrepancy in the approaches of Mill and Plato towards custom implies that the former author does not recognize it as a certain kind of obligation to follow due to its wide acceptance on the part of the society, while the latter philosopher can be considered the advocate of common norms and traditions. According to Mill, the main obstacle for the personal progress is that only a group of people aspires self-development, and the rest of the society is quite satisfied with its current state. Indeed, such adherence to common rules and customs impedes personal growth: an individual unconditionally subordinated to traditions and conventional models of behavior loses the ability to analyze, to reflect, and to evaluate critically these or other beliefs. Contrary, making certain decisions independently a person acquires the necessary qualities that complement the personality. This kind of an individual, who acts at its discretion, also chooses the specific goal and is supposed to utilize all the personal abilities; besides, such the attempts allow a person to permanently enhance innate talents for further development (Mill 1859/2001). From Mill's point of view, the meaning of this evolution lies not in the results of labor and art, but in the people themselves. In fact, this vigorous activity is the essential condition for the personal progress and comprehensive development that subsequently would influence the entire society (Robson 1989).

As opposed to Mill, Plato in the *Republic* affirms an individual's adherence to common rules to be the necessary element, which ensures the stability and prosperity in the ideal state. In other words, each social class has the responsibilities to perform the definite functions: philosopher kings govern, guardians protect the *polis* from foreign aggression, and workers provide the state with necessary goods and services. Moreover, the very existence of the *polis* is impossible without this strict order and the division of labour. The rationale of such the discipline can be traced in the Book II of the *Republic*:

But we cautioned the shoemaker, you know, against attempting to be an agriculturist or a weaver or a builder besides, with a view to our shoemaking work being well done; and to every other artisan we assigned in like manner one occupation, namely, that for which he was naturally fitted, and in which, if he let other things alone, and wrought at it all his time without neglecting his opportunities, he was likely to prove a successful workman. (Plato 380 B. C. /1907, p. 60)

3. 4. Views on the equality and respective political regimes

Furthermore, citizens' specific innate inclinations revealed during childhood determine the distribution of citizens to these social classes; the changing of social class is also possible in accordance with talents of a person (Schofield 2006). Nonetheless, such the phenomenon of social vertical mobility cannot be regarded as a violation of law or common norms; it rather fits into the framework of approved behavior.

In addition, Mill claims that his concept of liberty applies solely to adult individuals, by contrast, those, who require protection and care should not be taken into account when considering the individual freedom. In particular, such the statement excludes not only children as being minors, but also some underdeveloped nations. In other words, according to Mill, in the case when the objectives of the tyranny are achieved and properly justified, the despotism can be applicable to certain barbaric civilizations; he explains:

... it is difficult to see on what principles but those of tyranny they can be prevented from living there under what laws they please, [...]. A recent writer, in some respects of considerable merit, proposes (to use his own words,) not a crusade, but a *civilizade*, against this polygamous community, to put an end to what seems to him a retrograde step in civilization. It also appears so to me, but I am not aware that any community has a right to force another to be civilized. (Mill 1859/2001, p. 131)

Moreover, author emphasizes that the very concept of liberty cannot be introduced to nations that have not reached the specific level of development, where the free and equal discussion is capable of solving various issues (Mill 1859/2001). While Mill recognizes and justifies the oppressive regime in certain states in order to achieve benefits, Plato criticizes tyranny in its entire manifestations and irrespective of the nation's level of development. He is convinced that the tyranny cannot be advocated by virtuous intentions (Plato 380 B. C. /1907).

Concerning the relation between an individual and a state, J. S. Mill defines the political liberty as a condition of independence from the tyranny of public authorities. Simultaneously, political power is regarded as a dangerous instrument held by state representatives, which can be directed against external enemies, as well as against citizens of a state. Therefore, in order to prevent the abuse of competencies on the part of public officials, the political power should be limited.

Mill proposes two methods of limiting absolute state influence: the recognition of certain rights and the establishment of constitutional limitations (Urbinati, Zakaras 2007). The former element creates the specific sphere of fundamental human rights, which cannot be violated by state authorities; otherwise, individuals themselves can depose it. Also, the latter

method of restricting political power implies the invention of certain laws and legal norms that would separate the entire state influence into the several sectors, which nowadays is being called the separation of powers. To be more precise, the separation of powers principle claims the division of state authority into the three independent and mutually accountable public institutions, which perform legislative, executive, and judicial competencies (Field 2013).

Moreover, even in democratic regimes, when it appears that public authorities as the representatives of citizens should manifest the will of people, the limitation of political power remains extremely relevant. Mill explains such the phenomenon by the risk of emergence of the so-called 'tyranny of the majority'; that is, when interests of minorities or a particular individual are infringed for the benefit of the majority. Besides, people themselves are able to abuse the political power, especially, when they attempt to suppress the diversity of other individuals' opinions that is tantamount to the tyranny (Mill 1859/2001).

Hence, it can be argued that, to some extent, Mill is the supporter of democracy, except the 'tyranny of the majority'; by contrast, Plato is the complete opponent of the democratic state. The Greek philosopher states that democracy maintains the equality for those individuals, who are endowed with innate talents, with other persons, who are not. Plato regards it as an injustice that cannot yield utility to the society and to the state. In the *Republic* Plato affirms that the democratic regime is established when 'the poor win the day, killing some of the opposite party, expelling others, and admitting the remainder to an equal participation in civic rights and offices; and most commonly the offices in such a state are given by lot' (Plato 380 B. C. /1907, p. 287).

Furthermore, from the initial consideration, the diversity of views and opinions, as well as the freedom of expression and the freedom of the will are seen quite attractive; nonetheless, citizens of such a state are able to choose independently, whether to obey laws or violate them. Obviously, such behavior of individuals may provoke defiance and disorder, which cannot contribute the stability of a state. In addition, according to Plato, democracy, where only freedoms are pursued, while other values are neglected, distorts and inevitably transforms into the tyranny (Plato 380 B. C. /1907). Although views of Plato and Mill towards democracy are rather contradictory, they both criticize the regime for certain reasons: Mill describes 'the tyranny of the majority' and the possibility of power abuse on the part of state officials, while Plato argues that stability of the society and the excess of freedom are incompatible.

3. 5. Relations between a state and citizens

Although from the initial consideration approaches of J. S. Mill and Plato towards the notion of liberty appears completely different, they have certain similar ideas on the issues of the individuality, the personal development, as well as on the system of maintaining the order within the society.

3. 5. 1. Individuality

Firstly, concerning the relation between state and citizens, Mill supports the idea that the notion of liberty is somehow connected with human personality, which is defined as the ability of an individual to possess an own opinion, specific lifestyle, natural character, and so forth. Mill assigns the individuality quite important role in the provision of liberty:

... the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being; that it is not only a co-ordinate element with all that is designated by the terms civilization, instruction, education, culture, but is itself a necessary part and condition of all those things; there would be no danger that liberty should be undervalued, and the adjustment of the boundaries between it and social control would present no extraordinary difficulty. (Mill 1859/2001, pp. 80-81)

In fact, the genuinely open society accepts diverse individualities and does not limit them in accordance with the common opinion; besides, if certain beliefs differ from those admitted by the majority of people in a state, their existence is utterly significant for the benefit of the whole society. Also, Mill justifies the idea that consent of individuals on various issues is objectionable for the establishment and development of the free community. The diversity of views and perspectives, as well as the plenty of lifestyles, and people's characters are regarded as an engine for the social and personal development (Mill 1859/2001). Hence, the acceptance of human individuality within the society can be considered the criterion of its openness, while the attempts to limit people's originality have negative effects on them.

Besides, Plato's concept on individuals' natural inclinations and talents that need to be evolved is quite similar to the Mill's comprehension of the personality. In the both patterns, human individuality should be supported by a state and should yield benefits for the well-being of the entire society. Moreover, in the model of the ideal state, Plato founds the division of social classes in accordance with such the natural inclinations and the individuality. Also, within the *polis*, it is possible for an outstanding and talented citizen to proceed to a superior social class (Rabieh 2006). However, as it was mentioned above, it cannot be regarded as the manifestation of individual liberty on the grounds that even in this case it is the nature or the divine power that has determined the fate of a person. Thereby, Plato and Mill, in their concepts of liberty, ascribe the great importance to the notion of individuality, since it is capable of influencing the well-being and the stability of the society.

3. 5. 2. Education

Secondly, Plato and Mill give the priority to the evolution of personality and to the education of individuals, rather than to the development of their physical abilities. Mill regards the individuality and its cultivation as the indispensable element of the material and spiritual well-being of a particular person, as well as of the whole society. *On Liberty* mentions that different generations, civilizations, and cultures can be connected owing to the personal development; the individuality is also claimed to be the fundamental condition of liberty (Nussbaum 1998).

Moreover, in Plato's model of the ideal state, the role of education and physical training appears utterly significant for the classes of guardians and philosophers. The author argues that proper and early education provides the opportunity to reveal the existing natural inclinations of individuals, which can be improved further. As it was mentioned above, personal development in the *polis*, according to the *Republic*, includes the both mental and physical cultivation, the 'music for the mind' and the 'gymnastic for the body', respectively (Plato 380 B. C. /1907, p. 64). Nevertheless, the former type of the education is paid more attention and is given high priority in time of its obtaining due to the fact that misconceptions

and improper views received in the childhood can significantly affect individuals' perceptions, while gymnastics can be practiced in different periods of human lives (Plato 380 B. C. /1907, p. 65). Therefore, the same as in the Mill's concept, Plato considers the development of the personality, which includes aesthetic, moral, and mental education, to be among the significant elements of social well-being.

3. 5. 3. Interference of the state authorities

Finally, Plato and J. S. Mill accept the idea of the specific penalties' utilization in order to maintain a social order in a state. Mill in his concept of liberty assigns the priority to the issue of utility for the public, as well as for a particular individual. Generally, all the actions, which can be justified by the reason of usefulness, that is, they cause the constant interest of an individual, can be considered appropriate in terms of morality. The sole exception is that such the actions must not harm other members of the society; otherwise, state authorities as the representative of public opinion can utilize the specific commonly accepted punishment. Also, it is beneficial to mention that Mill equates inaction of an individual in the prevention of offense with the infliction of harm to others. For example, 'to give evidence in a court of justice; to bear his fair share in the common defence, or in any other joint work necessary to the interest of the society of which he enjoys the protection; and to perform certain acts of individual beneficence, such as saving a fellow-creature's life, or interposing to protect the defenceless against ill-usage' are the cases when the interference on the part of a persons is required (Mill 1859/2001, p. 20).

Albeit, the direct intervention and restriction of individual freedom by the society is strictly prohibited, the public censure can be utilized as the instrument of oppression. Occasionally, people unintentionally infringe upon the interests of other members of the society without the infliction of obvious harm. In this case, legal punishment cannot be exercised but a culprit may be punished by the public opinion. Such social pressure, according to Mill, is acceptable and necessary; besides, it suits the framework of what is permitted (Mill 1859/2001).

Moreover, Plato, claiming the fixed functioning order of the society, establishes the specific penalties for a failure to comply with the duties of a citizen in the ideal state. For example, the vast attention in his dialogue *Laws* is given to the institution of the family as the basis of political and social stability. Since, common rules and laws within the *polis* embrace not only public, but also private relations, members of the society, who refused to marry at the prescribed age, have to be appointed by appropriate punishment, like the fine or the deprivation of other civil rights. Furthermore, Plato also mentions the public censure as the disciplinary measure (Recco and Sanday 2013).

4. CONCLUSION / SUMMARY

To conclude, the approaches of Plato and Mill towards liberty are quite different; however, their notion of the individual freedom is not absolute. Plato limits the liberty with the division of a labour in his ideal state, while Mill with the possibility of injuring other individuals. Regarding the freedom of will, freedom of speech and expression, all the concepts, according to Mill, are associated with inflicting no harm to the rest of the society. Simultaneously, Plato restricts these freedoms by the predestination of each individual to

perform specific functions; besides, all the human activities are subordinated to the ideology of the *polis*. Concerning the democracy and the tyranny, views of philosophers also differ: on the one hand, Plato approves none of them; on the other hand, Mill criticizes the tyranny of the majority and justifies the despotism in barbaric civilizations. However, the both authors agree upon the understanding of the individuality, personal development, and social punishment system.

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