Freedom in a Democratic Society

Mill and Freedom from the Tyranny of the Majority

Recall from Locke’s view of how democracy should function that the members of the minority, in order to live up to their original contract, must submit to the will of the majority. This can easily lead to oppression and tyranny. Mill argues that to avoid this there needs to a fundamental respect for the freedom of individuals, provided that their actions don’t harm anyone.

To accomplish this it is necessary to place restrictions on the powers of the government. First of all this requires the identification of fundamental liberties or rights for individuals that the government cannot infringe upon. This is much more easily achieved in a democratic society rather than a monarchy or aristocracy. In the first democracies, however, since the idea was that the people govern themselves, it was not seen as necessary to place restrictions on their power over themselves. The fallacy inherent in this is that this amounts to any given person being governed by all the rest, and to the majority may oppress the minority. Thus, it is always necessary to protect the freedom of individuals.

In a democratic society where the majority tyrannizes the minority, who is responsible? Or, how does the majority tyrannize?
It is not simply limitations on the government that must be established and upheld, it is also limitations on the minority being subject to the strictures of public opinion. The question then becomes: where do we place this limit?

What are the two factors that have to be balanced here? What are the dangers of falling too close to one end over the other?

What are the reasons that societies are so susceptible to the imposing of the majority opinion or morality upon the members of the minority?

Why are attempts to address this problem often ineffective?

People do not have a clear idea of what restrictions should be placed on the government, so they work from whatever opinion they have in any given case.

“[T]he sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right…. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign…. ” (429)

What kinds of freedom does this principle ensure for the individual?
Four grounds for freedom (431-32):

1) If any opinion is suppressed, and true, it is to our detriment for then we cannot be corrected.
2) If a false opinion is suppressed, it may contain some truth and lead to progression of ideas or knowledge.
3) If prevailing opinion is completely true, it still benefits from challenge so that people understand why it is true.
4) Suppression of opinion stifles the development of character and conviction in one’s views from reason or experience.

Why are these reasons for ensuring freedom of the individual?

King and Freedom from Racial Prejudice

Racial segregation and the suppression of African American’s in the United States seems to be an exemplification of the failure of Mill’s fourth ground. King describes the new self-worth and dignity acquired by African Americans with the beginnings of desegregation. This gave rise to a racial crisis because the majority opinion (in the South) was that African Americans should not have rights equal to whites. They were not willing to easily give up the privileges that came with segregation and oppression of African Americans.

Historically the two ways of dealing with oppression by the oppressed were to either submit, or acquiesce, or to rise up against the oppressors with hatred and violence.

What is the problem with rising up in this way? What consequences does it have?
King advocates, rather, a policy of nonviolent resistance, the method used by Ghandi. This is the method used by the student movement against racial prejudice that King is discussing the philosophical grounding for. He claims that the first principle that grounds it is that the “means must be as pure as the end.” He cites communism of a political movement that failed because it assumed that the ends justify the means.

“[I]n the long run, we must see that the end represents the means in process and the ideal in the making. In other words, we cannot believe, or we cannot go with the idea that the end justifies the means because the end is preexistent in the means. …immoral destructive means cannot bring about moral and constructive ends.” (438)

Another important feature of this philosophy is that it adheres to a principle of noninjury. On this principle, on the external side, people must refrain from physical violence even if hit. On this principle, on the internal side, people must “avoid internal violence of the spirit;” hence the love ethic in the student movement.

King uses a Greek distinction between three kinds of love: *eros*, or aesthetic or beautiful love; *phila*, or reciprocal love; and *agape*, which is a deeper “understanding, creative, redemptive, good will to all men.” (439) It is this third sense of love that King associates with the student movement. He describes this as “the love of God operating in the human heart.” Perhaps this is what people are looking for when they ask the question: “What would Jesus do?”

Another important thing that King points to is the attacking the unjust *system* in place, and not the individuals caught in that system.

Why is this an important part of the strategy? How does it take into account human nature?
Another thing that King points to is the creative role of suffering. History is filled with examples of the social force of inflicting suffering.

**How do the nonviolent turn suffering into a powerful social force?**

Another is the recognition of the great potential for goodness within human nature, and the potential for change that this provides.

**Why is this different from believing that all people are good or a naïve “faith in humanity?”**

The complexity comes in when these philosophical principles are used to form a movement or policies of action. Since civil disobedience will involve following some laws and breaking others, the problem becomes how to do this in a way consistent with these philosophical principles. This becomes a problem of distinguishing between just laws and unjust laws.

One way of describing unjust laws is that they are those that “individuals did not have a part in creating or enacting because they were denied the right to vote.” (441) Just law is saneness made legal. This following of just laws and not following unjust ones leads to social change without leading to anarchy.
The movement aims to bring about a positive peace. Peace sustained by a positive force, rather than the conditions under segregation which was peaceful only because there was absence of resistance, it was a negative peace. The peace desired is equality and respect for all persons—a “true brotherhood.” It also recognizes that action is required to bring about change. It rejects the myth that things will become better in time all on their own, the so-called *myth of time*. Nevertheless, it was a movement based on hope and faith in the future. The movement was sustained by the belief and conviction that “we shall overcome,” even though the road to positive peace would cause great suffering or death for the participants in the movement.
Questions:

Suppose a change was made to the educational system where the development of critical thinking skills started in primary education and was developed so that a student who graduated from high school already had sophisticated critical thinking skills, say, at the level of a philosophy graduate.

Would this affect the tendency and would it affect the ability of the majority to impose their opinions or morality on the minority? What contextual factors do you think could push things one way or the other?

What would the effect of this be in a society that respected Mill’s principle of personal freedom? How might this contribute to bring about the kind of “brotherhood” that King described?