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Rectifying Non-Interventionism and Imperialism in John Stuart Mill's *A Few Words*

In *A Few Words on Non-Intervention*, John Stuart Mill expresses his reservations about intervening in foreign affairs, while providing a few exceptions where he believes intervention to be acceptable. Though generally opposed to foreign “despotic” forms of governance that are inflicted on communities, Mill makes an exception for the governance of “barbarians.” Mill’s seemingly contradictory positions – that of supporting imperialism, while also advocating for non-interventionist policies – create tensions in his writing that are difficult to rectify without subscribing to an outdated belief in western superiority.

Mill argues against most instances of foreign intervention, unless there is some “humanitarian” purpose in doing so. War is heavily put into question by Mill, who argues that going to war for “an idea” is just as “criminal” as going to war for “territory or revenue.” (Mill, 258) However, Mill makes exceptions. For instance, if a country is engrossed in a civil war in which both parties are corrupt, Mill finds it acceptable for a third party to intervene. Additionally, if a foreign power has *already* intervened in a country, Mill argues that it is permissible to become involved. Mill sees this as an example of “intervention to enforce non-intervention,” which he argues is “always

righteous, always moral.” (Mill, 263) In Michael W. Doyle’s *The Question of Intervention: John Stuart Mill and the Responsibility to Protect*, Mill’s notion of allowing exceptions to non-interventionist policy is brought into question. Doyle states that “even well-intentioned interventions designed to promote liberty should be approached skeptically,” as intervention can often cause more harm than good. (Doyle, 47) One of Doyle’s primary arguments against intervention is that, even when well intentioned, it is possible for this act to become corrupt. Doyle argues against Mill’s optimism, rejecting the notion that certain countries are intrinsically equipped to impose “humanitarian intervention.” Doyle expresses the idea that, when left unchecked, interventions can quickly devolve into imperialism. In opposition to this stance, Mill might argue that intervention leading to imperialism is not the problem – rather, intervention in already “civilized” countries’ affairs is the real concern. In fact, Mill might argue against the use of the word “imperialism” to describe English expansion – rather, he believed that England ventures into colonies with the intention of improving them.

Meddling in the affairs of “civilized” countries is where problems arise. Mill states that any attempt to “exert influence” over a “civilized” country is in service of the party being intervened, and has no positive bearing on the interventionist (Mill, 252). It is easy to confuse intentions when getting involved with a foreign country, according to Mill, as countries often may initially intervene with good intentions, only to later find their true intentions were to simply impose their own government. Mill argues that if a country keeps to itself and does not meddle with affairs in other countries, it too will be left alone. The only exceptions to Mill’s non-interventionist

policies are for rescuing nationals abroad, intervening in civil wars that already have foreign influences involved, or expanding for “humanitarian purposes.”

When a country being infiltrated, however, is composed of “barbarians,” completely different rules apply. Mill argues that when dealing with “barbarians,” the government cannot have a reciprocal relationship as “barbarians cannot be depended on for observing any rules.” (Mill, 259) This fundamentally changes the capabilities of the country being intervened, allowing foreign powers more of a right to impose strong imperialist forms of governance on the community. Rather than an exception to his non-interventionist policies, Mill sees imperialism as a kind of outlier; a different animal, so to speak. Imperialism falls under Mill’s conception of humanitarian foreign pursuits. Because of the community’s “primitive” nature, Mill does not see foreign involvement as intervention, as there is no advanced civilization in which to intervene. Rather, Mill sees intervention in India, for example, as a gesture of English goodwill and generosity – as England is imposing order and helping to develop what Mill considers to be a “barbaric” place.

Mill seems to excuse the contradictions present in “A Few Words on Non-Intervention” on the pretense of his assumptions regarding racial inferiority – specifically on the pretense of how he views Indians in comparison to Englishmen. In Mark Tunick’s article, “Tolerant Imperialism: John Stuart Mill's Defense of British Rule in India” he distinguishes the hierarchy through which Mill views imperialist intervention. Indians are considered by Mill to be a step up from

“savages,” and thus instead fall into the category of “slaves to despots” because they “live in communities.” (Tunick, 595) Because of their status, Mill rejects the notion of using violent force in order to condition them to accept English governance. Other forms of force, such as non-representative government, were preferred by Mill as they allowed South Asians to assimilate to English governance non-violently, while still allowing them to “learn obedience.” (Tunick, 599) Rather than subjecting them to a “government of force,” Mill believed it was best to provide “one of guidance.” Mill intended this governance to only take place over a finite amount of time, believing this despotic system to be a stepping stone to “prepare Indians for self rule.” (Tunick, 599) While seemingly somewhat sympathetic to India, in *Considerations of Representative Government* Mill takes a more stern stance, claiming that India would need “rigorous despotism to civilize it.” This stance, however, is moderated by Mill’s reluctance to “dissolve” the governing power of India as a new government could misconstrue the needs of India and its people.

In *On Liberty*, Mill writes that he does not believe “any community has a right to force another to be civilized,” seemingly contradicting his support of England’s imperialism in India. (Mill, *On Liberty*) Mill’s main concern is the use of force when imposing power on a foreign country, as he views “despots” to have a right to “the principle of liberty,” though he simultaneously views them to be “barbaric.” (Tunick, 2) According to Tunick, Mill can be classified as a “tolerant imperialist,” – an imperialist who prioritizes reason and the natural laws of shared human moral codes. Mill did not believe in forced-assimilation or the enslavement of those conquered by

England. Rather, he advocated for providing education accessibility to children in India, and structuring Indian society in a way similar to that of England. Yet, how could this intervention have been moral if there was no way to verify that India was willingly being civilized?

Mill bases his assumption of Indian willingness on a few factors. For one, his philosophy of tolerant imperialism involves a kind of moral standard. The purpose of intervening in a country like India, in Mill's view, is for "moral" reasons such as "end(ing) slavery, reconcil(ing) belligerents, end(ing) civil wars, or interceding for mild treatment of the vanquished." (Tunick, 592) (Mill, 252) The pursuit of India as a lucrative territory would be considered immoral by Mill as England would deplete India's resources, thereby leaving it in a worse position than it was in before being colonized. Mill insists that the purpose of a "civilized" country intervening in a "barbaric" country is to "promote the well being of the uncivilized." (Tunick, 592)

Considering Mill believes that "barbaric" communities need so much help, it is not far off to assume that he measures a community's willingness to be colonized, not by the opinions of the actual natives to that country, but by his own opinions on the moral basis for which their country is being interceded. Because Mill perceives these "barbarians" to not know what is in their best interest, he judges a country's right to invade based on their supposed motives.

As Mill's ultimate hope for imperialism is to leave India as an independent, "developed" country, there are a few standards by which Mill measures development. Rather than viewing development from a western perspective, Mill is not interested in the assimilation of Indians to English ways of life. He does not care for Indians to adopt English ways of dress or traditions.

Rather, he is interested in India's independent development through a growth of a system of law and "the development of cooperative ventures," in order to fully "overcome nature" as a society. This involves the "sacrifice" of one's own individual will, in order to trade "savagery" for "civilization." (Tunick, 592) Still, these standards for development necessitate a framework of thought that defines civilization from a Western perspective.

Despite Mill's good intentions and focus on morality as a basis for imperial expansion, his adamance about the importance of non-intervention still comes into conflict with his approval of westward colonization. No matter how noble the aim, imperialism is still a vehement example of unprompted intervention in another country. One of Mill's primary reasons for supporting colonization in India is that he desires for India to one day express its freedom, having been transformed by the English standard that was prescribed to it. However, one of Mill's main points regarding intervention in other countries is that the changes made under the rule of an intervening power are unlikely to last. Mill states that "the only test possessing any real value," to determine if a country will be self-sustaining after achieving freedom, is if those people are "willing to brave labor and danger for their liberation."

Mill argues against assisting native peoples in achieving freedom from despotic governments as he believes that if they do not have the willpower to achieve that freedom on their own, no other "party in the nation could compel it" to maintain that status. "No people," according to Mill, "remain free but because it was determined to be so," meaning that unless a country achieves freedom by its own volition, any aid received by that country will go to waste. (Varouxakis, 60)

(Mill, 262) Even a win against the despotic government in power will be meaningless when things revert back to the way they were before. Mill seems to hold English colonies to a different standard than he holds other foreign countries, in terms of how entitled England is to intervene in the functions of their government. Because colonization is a “humanitarian” practice for England in Mill’s view, these territories seem to be exempt from the international standards that Mill sets for all other countries. Rather than independent countries in their own right, Mill seems to view England’s colonies as charity-cases of sorts, lacking in the civilizational depth necessary to be given the same respect as other countries. Because of the assumed “barbaric” nature of their citizens, the colonies are not given the same rights to self determination as other more developed nations.

Mill, however, was not a radical imperialist compared to many other Europeans at the time. Mill wrote the first liberal defense of imperialism, and was opposed to the use of colonies to sustain a mercantilist economic system in England. Mill “maintained that colonization involved an expenditure of capital,” as investing in colonies meant “less capital (was) available for investment at home.” (Sullivan, 602) Because of the distance between England’s colonies and their mother country, Mill believed that the motivation for Englishmen to move was very slim. The movement of England’s population was one of the only economic benefits that Mill saw from investing in colonies. If this was not likely to happen, Mill saw no other benefits for colonizing countries like India, other than for the “greater good” of the colony. Mill took an interest in legal reform in India, particularly in the enforcement of the “Benthamite principles of simplicity and centralization,” which he believed would create a “more authoritative legal

structure.” (Sullivan, 605) He argued for more centralized governmental power, allowing the government in India to act as a kind of “landlord,” in order to distribute land more equally among inhabitants. Mill saw the structure that England added to India and was moved by the effects that he was seeing firsthand. After these experiences in India, Mill began campaigning for the expansion of the English empire in order to benefit their economy. He went astray from the common liberal belief that the commonwealth was not economically beneficial for the U.K.

Mill’s continued involvement with English colonies late in his life retained the same racial biases as it did when he was young. Colonies such as New Zealand, Canada and Australia were considered by Mill to mostly be composed of individuals of a “European race,” and thus Mill found it suitable for them to be self-governed. (Sullivan 606) Conversely, England’s Asian and African colonies continued to be treated as “barbarous,” even late into Mill’s life after their many years of status as a dependent colony. Rather than giving these colonies the option to eventually denounce their dependent status, (a privilege given to the more “white” colonies) Asian and African provinces were forced to stay in stagnance, despite the great strides that they made developmentally. Even Ireland was considered by Mill to be a “barbarous” colony – and was also denied its right to eventually succeed from England. His reasons for promoting further expansion of the British empire late in life were for the improvement of “England’s economic, cultural, and political interests.” (Sullivan, 606) Interestingly, Mill evolved from having an interest in colonization for reasons purely having to do with morals, to promoting colonization for its economic benefits later in his life – something that young Mill was once opposed to.



In focusing on the humanitarian side of imperialism rather than the economic side, young John Stuart Mill was able to make sense of colonialism without sacrificing his liberalist views about non-intervention. Mill's humanitarian aims in India were fruitful – a schooling system was enforced to teach children in India, though this education was primarily westernized. Mill strongly advocated for the East India Company to retain control over India, rather than parliament, as he believed that the East India Company better understood the interests and needs of the colony. When he lost this battle and parliament gained control of India, he advocated for representatives.

Though these actions do indicate that Mill was sincere in his humanitarian advocacy for India, his biased notions of “barbarism” that prevented Mill from granting India the freedom to succeed from England ultimately acted against his original aim. Initially concerned with using colonialism as a means to propel a country forward, Mill was hopeful that one day, after being under the instruction of the East India Company, India could go off on its own. Mill was hopeful that in guiding an “uncivilized” country, England would be able to contribute positively to the world not through “a government of force, but through one of guidance.” (Tunick, 596)

However, Mill never ended up advocating for the loosening of English power over India. Instead, while Mill promoted “despotic” control over India, he simultaneously promoted more non-interventionist policies when it came to European colonies, which he allowed to self rule. Mill seemingly reserves non-interventionism for countries and colonies that are composed of

Europeans. England in Mill's time never quite reached a point where Non-European colonies were considered to be sophisticated enough to have the capacity to govern themselves. Mill's positions regarding non-interventionism and imperialism were heavily informed by his biases regarding race and the rationality he believed Non-European people to possess. In the context of British foreign policy, Mill helped to legitimize the aims of colonialism while simultaneously solidifying race relations between Englishmen and their Asian and African colonies.

MLA Citations:

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