Poor Dale

Dale Thompson has refused to participate in the salute to the flag and the pledge of allegiance and, by so doing, has created problems for himself. There is a great deal of pressure on Dale to conform to the expectations of the group; so much pressure, in fact that Dale is reduced to tears. His refusal to participate is based on his personal moral convictions. He states his priorities: His family and his religion obviously come before his state, his school, and pressure from his peers. At one point during the discussion, Dale is confronted with comments from Maria Jahorski:

> "Because it's like Mr. P. says, everybody does this, stands during the salute, and no one else sees anything wrong with it, so why shouldn't you do the same thing."

Maria's argument is based on the idea that everybody's opinion is somehow the source of what is right. (She has not considered the alternative view that what is right should serve as the source of everyone's opinion. See *Euthyphro* by Plato.) Maria is strongly influenced by the democracy in which she lives; a system which contends that the will of the majority should prevail. This democratic precept has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. J. S. Mill sketches out the reasons that democracy has emerged, its strengths and its weaknesses in *On Liberty*.

On Liberty was written to examine the nature and limits of the power exercised by society over the individuals in that society. Mill sees the political question as a struggle between two basic concepts: Liberty and Authority. Authority is seen as necessary to a political body on two counts: Firstly, to provide protection from external enemies; secondly, to establish some internal order and prevent 'in-fighting'. The concept of Liberty evolved as a reaction to and as a limitation of this authority. The limiting of authority is attempted in two ways: 1. The development of certain rights, the breach of which justifies resistance to authority. 2. The development of a political body designed to represent the interests of the populace through which authority must channel its major governing powers.

As an extension of the second premise, it eventually became advantageous to have those in Authority selected from the populace and dependent on the will of the people for the retention of their power. The reasoning under this model is that the interests of the rulers would then be identical with those of the governed. The underlying assumption is that a nation controlled by itself will not tyrannize itself and there would no longer be a need to limit the powers of Authority. But theory and reality differ:

> The people who exercise the power are not always the same people over whom it is exercised; and the self government spoken of is not the governing of each by himself but of each by all of the rest.

The division between the rulers and the ruled emerges; this time in terms of the majority and the minority.

> The majority consequently may desire to oppress part of their number and precautions are as much needed against it as any other abuse of power. *(On Liberty)*

This is a brief accounting of the origins of the 'tyranny of the majority' as it is called. It is a reversal, to be sure, of the situation where an individual (or small group) oppresses society. Now we see society at large oppressing the individual. And just as the terms of tyranny are altered, so too is the style of that oppression.

The tyranny of the majority is pervasive; there is no place to hide from the pressure of society. This type of tyranny can permeate all aspects of our lives.

> . . . penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, enslaving the soul itself . . . There needs (to be) protection against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose its own ideas and rules of conduct on those who dissent from them. *(On Liberty)*

Mill points out society's effort to prevent the development of any character not in accordance with the mandates of the majority. This all encompassing permeation of the individual by society is to be feared as much as any other form of oppression. We are in search of new ways to limit this new Authority.

When this episode is examined by children, questions are bound to arise such as, "Is it fair for Dale not to stand . . .?" and "Is it right for anyone to make Dale do something against his principles?" Public opinion, the will of the majority, and peer pressure affect our daily lives. How much influence they have should be up to us. The important distinction to make here is in which areas of our lives do these forces pertain? Surely, there are situations where society's desires should have an impact on our actions and attitudes. Just as clearly, there are things in life which are purely a matter of individual preference. We must be able to examine our actions in light of our rights as well as the rights of others.

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References

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