

# On Liberty

**J.S Mill**

## John Stuart Mill : Life

John Stuart Mill was born on May 20, 1806 in north London, the oldest of nine children. His father, James Mill, was a student of Jeremy Bentham, a radical utilitarian. John himself was accelerated through school and shared the company of many of his father's intellectual friends throughout his adolescence.

In fact; young John was sent to France to live with Samuel Bentham, the brother of Jeremy. It is often lamented that John lacked a childhood thanks to his father's intense drive of his son into the academic world. Indeed, soon after his education, John followed his father into a job at the East India Company where he remained in leadership positions until the company's demise in 1858.

Mill's early writings and contributions to philosophy were published in two newspapers, The Traveller and The Morning Chronicle, both edited by associates of his friends. The radical philosophical journal Westminster Review served as another pulpit for Mill and a means to further elaborate on his views.

Mill's Autobiography, completed shortly before his death in 1873, recounted the experiences that he had with the London Debating Society where his view were seen as being the product of an obsessive academic upbringing, with but more plain memorization than true philosophical thought. The experience he gained as a member of the society taught him the value of political philosophy not as a mode to create the ideal political system, but a means of determining the principles necessary to establish any successful governing system.

Mill continued to contribute to many philosophical journals and various newspapers in later years as he worked on his greater works on logic and on political economy, namely the two volume A System of Logic and Principles of Political Economy, respectively.

In 1851, John Stuart Mill married Harriet Taylor after twenty years of friendship and two years since the death of her first husband. Harriet died seven years into the marriage, just months after Mill's retirement at the East India Company. However, her impact on Mill's life was undeniable. He referred to her as his biggest influence and as a more intelligent thinker than himself. His praise for her is without bounds, he credits her for inspiring his spontaneity and original thoughts in his life and writings. He also became an advocate for her issues of interest, such as birth control and women's rights. After Harriet's death, Mill turned his adulation onto her daughter, his stepdaughter Helen who he acclaimed as another brilliant inspiration.

Mill published a series of writings on politics and ethics based on discussions he and Harriet had and manuscript writings they had collaborated on. On Liberty, one of Mill's most renowned essays published in 1859 opened with a moving dedication to his late wife. Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform followed closely that same year while his Considerations on Representative Government, were published soon after, in 1861.

Mill's interest in current politics and issues of the day did not wane aside all of his writing, and in actuality he ran for and won the Parliamentary seat of Westminster without any campaigning since he found it improper to attempt to sway the vote due to his beliefs on political process. He actively debated the 1867 Reform Bill on the floor of Parliament, convincing the government to make many useful changes to the bill. He worked diligently for the fair representation of women, and the reduction of the national debt.

Mill died in Avignon on May 6, 1873 after a successful career in Parliament and a lifetime of influencing and changing political and philosophical thought of the day.

### **John Stuart Mill : Philosopher and Essayist**

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In an age which prides itself on its liberation from all absolutes, which has succeeded in making the very word 'absolute' sound archaic, there is one concept that has very nearly the status of an absolute. That is the idea of liberty. However much the idea may be violated in practice, however much it may be distorted in conception, the idea itself continues to exercise that ultimate authority which once belonged to the idea of God, nature, justice, reason, or the ideal polity.

Even those regimes which consistently and flagrantly violate the most elementary precepts of liberty feel obliged to pay lip-service to the idea by claiming for themselves another kind of liberty: 'positive' liberty, a 'higher' freedom than 'mere' freedom. And those regimes which are most solicitous of liberty, whose institutions are designed to provide a considerable measure of liberty, are under constant reproach for falling short of the fullest measure of liberty. Indeed it is the most liberal countries that are most vulnerable to the charge of illiberality. There is hardly a matter of public concern that does not, sooner or later, raise the issue of liberty; not casually, peripherally, as one of a number of considerations to be taken into account, but as the basic and decisive consideration. The use and abuse of drugs, crime and punishment, pornography and obscenity, industrial and economic controls, racial and sexual equality, national security and defence, ecology, technology, bureaucracy, education, religion, the family, sex – all come up against the ultimate test: the liberty of the individual. Nor are the most venerable institutions immune to this challenge. It was once only revolutionaries and social rebels who denounced the 'bourgeois' family as authoritarian, ridiculed 'middle-class' notions of sexual normality and morality, declared all social conventions to be incompatible with individuality, and condemned all authorities – the state, the law, the Church, parents and elders – as agents of coercion. Today these opinions are the common coin of most liberals. Inevitably the elevation of the idea of liberty has led to the debasement of the idea of authority. As particular authorities have become suspect, so also has the very idea of authority. Deprived of legitimacy, of any presumption of right, authority is reduced to nothing more than the exercise of power or force.

What we are left with then, is what John Stuart Mill, more than anyone else, bequeathed to us: the idea of the free and sovereign individual. Intellectual bequests, to be sure, are notoriously complicated and devious. The court of public opinion through which such bequests are probated, is far more erratic than the courts of law. If it is difficult to establish the paternity of an idea, it is still more difficult to assign responsibility for that idea once it is launched upon the world. Yet there must be some responsibility for ideas as there is for wayward children – a moral if not a legal responsibility. The filiation of ideas was once aptly described by Lord Acton: ‘Ideas have a radiation and development, an ancestry and posterity of their own, in which men play the part of god-fathers and godmothers more than that of legitimate parents.’ At the very least it is this role of godfather that can be ascribed to Mill. And godfathers, it may be remembered, in Mill’s time as in Acton’s, had a more intimate relationship to their godchildren than is common today.

In one sense, of course, liberty had a long and honourable lineage before Mill. Acton himself traced it back to antiquity, indeed found it more prevalent in some periods of antiquity than in some periods of modernity. But in the sense in which it is widely held today, not as one of several principles making for a good life and a sound polity but as the pre-eminent and ultimate principle, it is peculiarly modern. And even within modernity, it is of relatively recent vintage. Milton’s *Areopagitica* is often cited as the Magna Carta of free thought. But Milton intended that freedom to apply only to the toleration of ‘neighbouring differences, or rather indifferences’; he explicitly excluded such differences as might subvert religious or civil authority – ‘popery and open superstition’, or any opinion ‘impious or evil absolutely either against faith or manners’. Similarly, Locke seems, at first sight, to posit a liberty strikingly similar to Mill’s; the ‘perfect freedom’ of all men to ‘order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit,’ on condition only of their obeying the law of nature that ‘no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions’. But that liberty existed, for Locke, only in a state of nature. And it was precisely because that state of nature was inadequate that men entered civil society and consented to limit not only their liberty of action but also of opinion: ‘No opinions contrary to human society, or to those moral rules which are necessary to the preservation of civil society, are to be tolerated by the magistrate.’ The denial of the existence of God, for example, could not be tolerated, because ‘promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon the atheist’.

And so it was with Mill’s more immediate predecessors and contemporaries: Adam Smith, the Founding Fathers, Paine and Godwin, Emerson and Thoreau, Proudhon and Stirner. Each celebrated liberty in one fashion or another, to one degree or another. But it remained for Mill to convert the idea of liberty into a philosophically respectable doctrine, to put it in its most comprehensive, extensive, and systematic form, the form in which it is generally known and accepted today.

Mill brought to the doctrine of liberty not only a single-mindedness of purpose that immediately attracted attention but also an intellectual authority that commanded instant respect. In 1859 when *On Liberty* appeared, he was fifty-three, the author of numerous essays which had earned him the reputation of a formidable social critic, and of two major works which had established him as the foremost philosopher and economist in England. His contemporaries have eloquently testified to the intellectual power he wielded, especially during the 1850s and ‘60s. His *System of Logic* was the standard text in Oxford, and his *Principles of Political Economy*, although not

required reading, was the gospel of all those who had any intellectual pretensions. The Conservative statesman and philosopher, Lord Balfour, who was neither a disciple of Mill nor much given to exaggeration, said in recalling his own student days at Cambridge: 'Mill possessed an authority in the English Universities... comparable to that wielded forty years earlier by Hegel in Germany and in the Middle Ages by Aristotle.' Leslie Stephen, a tutor at Cambridge and an admirer of Mill (although not an uncritical one), described Mill's authority in similar terms: 'In our little circle the summary answer to all hesitating proselytes was, "read Mill". In those argumentations of which I have spoken, hour after hour was given to discussing points raised by Mill as keenly as medieval commentators used to discuss the doctrines of Aristotle.'

Mill's credentials, therefore, were impeccable. And not only was he in his own right, by virtue of his own writings, the intellectual *par excellence*. He also held that title by hereditary right, so to speak, having been born and bred in the very centre of the intellectual establishment. In the history of thought, the son has so far outdistanced the father that it is difficult to keep in mind the importance of James Mill and the community of which he was a part. In his own time, James Mill was a figure of considerable intellectual stature, diminished only by the even more commanding figure of his avowed master, Jeremy Bentham, the father of English utilitarianism. Bentham, himself a bachelor, took a great interest in the education of his chief disciple's eldest son, especially since he was at this time engaged in drawing up an ideal course of education for a youth of the 'middling and higher ranks of life'. Although it was the father who supervised his son's daily education (the boy never attended any school or university), there is no doubt that both Bentham and James Mill looked upon the young boy as their heir-designate and that they intended to make of him the complete utilitarian – which is to say, the perfectly rational man.

This experiment in education has been dramatically re-counted in John Mill's *Autobiography*. In reading that account it is easy to be distracted by the sheer precocity of the young Mill: the fact that he read Greek by the age of three, had assimilated a considerable body of classical and historical literature before he was eight, and had mastered philosophy, political economy, mathematics, and the like by the ripe age of twelve. If one discounts Mill's modest disclaimer that what he did could have been done by 'any boy or girl of average capacity and healthy physical constitution', one must credit his own estimate of the immense saving in time represented by this intensive course of study; it gave him, he reckoned, a quarter-of-a-century advantage over most of his contemporaries. But more important, it gave him a sustained training in reasoning and analysis. When he was eleven, for example, in addition to his other studies, he had the task of reading aloud each day a portion of the manuscript of the *History of India* his father was then preparing for publication, the reading being accompanied by an analysis of the society and institutions of India compared with those of England, and by a critique of England as it was, compared with how it ought to be. Two years later his daily assignment was a written abstract of his father's discourses on the subject of political economy; these reports were discussed and rewritten until they satisfied his father, who then used them in preparing his *Elements of Political Economy*. (The work, published in 1821, included paragraph-résumés pre-pared by the youngster.) It was this kind of training, a training in the use of mind, that was the truly remarkable feature of Mill's education.

Whatever intellectual vicissitudes Mill was later to experience, this part of his education remained with him. But it became, at critical moments of his life, a terrible burden. No less famous than the account of his education was the account, also in the *Autobiography*, of the 'crisis' he went through at the age of twenty, when the whole of his education was, in effect, called into question. The young man was then well on his way to assuming the position for

which he had been groomed: he was engaged in the formidable work of preparing the five-volume edition of Bentham's *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* (formidable, because Bentham's peculiar habits of composition made this more a task of organizing and writing than of mere editing); he was a regular contributor to the Benthamite journal, the *Westminster Review*; he had founded and was actively involved in a debating club which he had named the Utilitarian Society (this was the first time 'utilitarian' was used in this sectarian sense) – all this in addition to his full-time job at the East India Office where he worked directly under his father. It was at this point, when his career seemed to be proceeding along the lines that had been laid out for it, that it underwent a sudden reversal. The nervous breakdown he then suffered was 'mental' in both senses of that word, intellectual and emotional.

He later recognized this crisis as a crisis of faith, rather like, he thought, the familiar experience of the Methodist smitten by a 'conviction of sin'. In his case, the crisis took the form of a fateful question:

'Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?' And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!' At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down. All my happiness was to have been found in the continual pursuit of this end. The end had ceased to charm, and how could there ever again be any interest in the means? I seemed to have nothing left to live for.

That irrepressible 'No!' testified at first only to the failure of utilitarianism to provide a satisfactory basis for his own life, the life of the dedicated reformer. But implicit in it was the recognition of a larger inadequacy. The difficulty was not only his inability to find his personal happiness in the 'greatest happiness of the greatest number', as the utilitarian formula had it; it was also in the utilitarian idea of happiness itself – the idea that happiness could be expressed by a calculus of pleasure and pain, a calculus that could only be arrived at rationally, analytically. What depressed him even more than the loss of his sense of vocation was the absence in him of any natural and spontaneous feeling, any poetic and artistic sensibility. He was convinced that the exclusive cultivation of the 'habit of analysis' had destroyed in him all capacity for emotion.

For six months he continued in a near-suicidal state of depression, apathetically going about his ordinary activities, confessing his thoughts to no one because he felt no one in his circle would understand them. Suddenly, as he recalled it in his *Autobiography*, a ray of light broke through:

I was reading, accidentally, Marmontel's *Mémoires*, and came to the passage which relates his father's death, the distressed position of the family, and the sudden inspiration by which he, then a mere boy, felt and made them feel that he would be everything to them – would supply the place of all that they had lost. A vivid conception of the scene and its feelings came over me, and I was moved to tears. From this moment my burthen grew lighter. The oppression of the thought that all feeling was dead within me, was gone. I was no longer hopeless: I was not a stock or a stone.

A generation raised on Freud will have no difficulty in interpreting this episode, and may only wonder at Mill's innocence in so blandly recounting it. Eight years later, during his father's final, prolonged illness, Mill suffered another breakdown, clearly as much 'mental' as physical, which he neglected to mention in his *Autobiography*. The early fictional fantasy of his father's death

was obviously easier to confront than the later reality. But if Mill was unaware of this dimension of the first crisis, he was sufficiently aware of its implications at another level. He was conscious of being liberated from a philosophy that had very nearly killed him, that had rendered him as lifeless as 'a stock or a stone'. In his tears, he found visible evidence of feeling, emotion, passion, life itself.

In our own awareness of the psychological depths of this crisis, we may be inclined to pay too little heed to its intellectual substance. Yet it was of the greatest intellectual moment. For it signified a new mode of thought that was to have the largest and most enduring consequences, not only for *On Liberty* but for all of Mill's writings. Mill himself was acutely sensible of this, although he somewhat understated it in his *Autobiography*. Recounting this stage of his 'mental progress', he described it as a compromise between the new and the old. In embracing a philosophy of 'anti-self-consciousness', he said he had not discarded whatever remained valid in utilitarianism. He continued to believe that happiness was 'the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life'. But he now thought it could be attained only if it were not made the direct and conscious end of life, but regarded rather as a by-product of other ends — the happiness of others, the improvement of mankind, art, beauty, the contemplation of nature, any activity pursued for its own sake. The 'internal culture of the individual', which utilitarianism had so fatally ignored, was one of the 'prime necessities of human well-being', of happiness itself. Mill hastened to add that he did not at this time renounce 'intellectual culture', the role of analysis either in the life of the individual or for the reform of society. He only meant to supplement that intellectual culture by an internal culture, to make the 'cultivation of the feelings' as primary as the cultivation of reason. In the private realm this meant giving a far greater emphasis to poetry, art, music, nature, whatever would stimulate the individual's sensibilities and passions. In the public realm it meant giving far less importance to the 'ordering of outward circumstances'. Social relations, he realized, were much more complicated than the Benthamites had assumed; politics was not a science, there was no one set of model institutions, and there was a large and important area of life which did not and should not come within the purview of the legislator or reformer.

Mill was to go through several other 'periods', as he de-scribed them, in the course of his personal and intellectual history. But this initial crisis of faith remained the decisive experience of his life and was reflected, in one way or another, in each of his major works. In his *Autobiography* he remarked upon the fact that he was inspired to rethink his early — that is, his father's — views on logic, and ultimately to write his own *System of Logic*, as a result of the recognition forced upon him at this time that his father's philosophic method was fundamentally erroneous in matters of politics and morals. One might well say the same of *On Liberty*, large parts of which read as if they had been written under the direct inspiration or the most vivid memory of this crisis. Indeed the original sketch of *On Liberty* was written at the same time that he was working on his autobiographical account of the crisis, and he rewrote *On Liberty* during the same years that he rewrote the *Autobiography*.

Whether Mill was aware of it or not, the echoes of that early experience reverberate through the pages of *On Liberty*. In this sense, *On Liberty* stands as a decisive rebuttal of his father. For it is here, more than in any other work, that he tried to provide an alternative view of man and society which would take proper account of both the 'intellectual culture' — reason and truth — and the 'internal culture' — the individual's feelings, passions, impulses, natural inclinations, personal idiosyncrasies. It is here that he tried to allow for the largest 'cultivation of the feelings' and where he was most wary of attempts to regulate and order 'outward circumstances'. If Mill

also fell victim in this work, as some critics have claimed, to one of the fallacies of his father's method, if he tried to reduce an extremely complicated set of phenomena to an excessively simple formula, this too may testify to the ambivalence which that early crisis of faith imposed upon the whole of his later life.

## 3

There are not many major intellectual figures whose personal lives impinged so directly and decisively upon their intellectual lives. After his father, it was his wife who played a crucial part in what Mill called his 'mental progress'. One might almost say that his wife took the place of his father.

In the aftermath of his crisis, Mill had discovered, in the poetry of Wordsworth and Goethe, and in the philosophy of Coleridge, Saint Simon and Comte, a fusion of thought and feeling, an appreciation of the 'many-sidedness' of human nature and society, that went far to fill the vacuum created by utilitarianism. But in one respect, as he confessed to one of his new friends, he was in a worse position than he had been before. He had lost the sense of community provided by the utilitarians, the assurance of a common purpose shared with others of like mind. Such personal ties as he now had were partial and limited, and he was left with a great sense of loneliness. He felt deprived, he said, of the kind of sympathy that could only come with 'perfect friendship'.

This confession was made in 1829. A year later he met that perfect friend – his 'incomparable friend', as he spoke of her in his *Autobiography* – in the person of Harriet Taylor. It was as if he had willed her into existence.

On the surface it was an unlikely friendship. Harriet Taylor was married, the wife of a prosperous merchant and the mother of two young children. (A third child was born soon afterwards.) Temperamentally and intellectually she was very different from Mill. It was perhaps these differences that attracted him. She represented everything that utilitarianism was not, everything that he still found wanting in his own character. Her few early writings reveal a romantic, intuitive mind, impassioned in opinion, impatient in sustained argument. She wrote poetry, fancied herself something of a bohemian, ex-pressed 'advanced' views on the subjects of love, marriage, divorce, and the status of women, and, in one brief, unpublished essay, anticipated the main theme and even some of the details of *On Liberty*.

Mill was twenty-four and Mrs Taylor twenty-three when they met. In spite of the flat assertion in his *Autobiography* that 'it was years after my introduction to Mrs Taylor before my acquaintance with her became at all intimate or confidential', it is evident from their correspondence that their acquaintance became intimate and confidential almost immediately. As early as 1831 a 'reconciliation' had to be effected between Mill and Mr Taylor. And a love letter written by Mill to her the following year contained every convention of that genre including its being written in French. The gossip about their affair (if it can be called that) finally reached his ailing father who taxed his son with being in love with another man's wife, to which the son is reported to have replied that 'he had no other feelings towards her, than he would have towards an equally able man'. Mrs Taylor herself assured a German friend that she was Mill's '*Seelenfreundin*'. And she advised Mill, when he was writing his *Autobiography*, to describe their relationship as one of 'strong affection, intimacy of friendship, and no impropriety'. Although the historian has no reason to doubt these assurances, some of their

friends and relatives apparently did, or at the very least questioned the propriety of a *Seelenfreundschaft* that so brazenly flouted convention.

For almost twenty years they maintained this relationship while she continued to be married to Mr Taylor. Mill dined at her London home, he weekended with her in the country (generally in the absence of her husband), and they took ex-tended trips abroad together, sometimes accompanied by one of her children. (During the whole of this period Mill lived with his family in London, where he continued to work for the East India Company.) Although they professed to see nothing improper about all this, they were obviously under great strain. Her husband's tacit acquiescence was punctuated by occasional feeble protests, as when he objected to Mill's dedication of the *Principles of Political Economy* to her. (The dedication finally appeared only in a limited number of gift copies.) There was the inevitable gossip among friends and relatives, and an exaggerated sense of that gossip on the part of its victims. Mrs Taylor felt ill-used by everyone, including Mill when he was insufficiently sensitive to what she took to be slights and offences. By the mid-forties, the situation had deteriorated to the point where Mill broke off relations with most of his old friends and was on very cool terms with his own family. Although Mr Taylor died in 1849, it was almost two years before they were married, evidently to allow for a proper period of mourning. And when they were finally married, Mill was so concerned about a minute irregularity in the marriage contract (he had first signed it 'J. S. Mill', and then, told to write out his full name, had squeezed in the 'John Stuart'), that he seriously proposed going through another, ceremony lest there be any doubt, 'either to our own or to any other minds', about the legality of their marriage – a sad commentary on the long years of their 'perfect friend-ship'.

If his marriage 'eased some of the difficulties of his life, it exacerbated others. His relations with his family became even more embittered when he fancied that his mother and sisters were tardy in paying their respects to his wife. (In fact, they had been so intimidated by him earlier when he discouraged their speaking of her that they were fearful of making any overtures after the marriage.) And when his brother presumed to mention the marriage without having been officially notified of it, Mill accused him of insolence. Nor did he and his wife forget the slights, or fancied slights, of old friends. Moving to Blackheath, a suburb of London, they retreated into even greater isolation. During the seven years of their marriage, they dined out seldom (if ever) and entertained at home fewer than half a dozen guests, most of them visitors from abroad. The only friends Mill saw were those who dropped in on him at his office or who attended the meetings of the Political Economy Club. Their ill health increased their sense of isolation. Convinced they had only a short time to live, they resented more than ever any intrusions from without. When they travelled abroad, separately or together (separately because he could not always leave his job to accompany her, or because she was too sick to accompany him), it was usually for reasons of convalescence. But whether abroad or at home, they were almost entirely withdrawn from the literary, social, and political circles they might have been expected to frequent.

Speaking of this period of his life in the *Autobiography*, Mill explained why a person of a 'really high class of intellect' would choose to have so few relations with 'society' as to be 'almost considered as retiring from it altogether'. Society, he said, was 'insipid'; it discouraged serious discussion; it was useful only to social climbers, while those already at the top could no more than comply with the customs and demands of their station; but worst of all, it was debasing to the intellectual, whose feelings, opinions, and principles could only be lowered by contact with it. That he was describing his own situation is evident from his concluding remarks: 'All these

circumstances united, made the number very small of those whose society, and still more whose intimacy, I now voluntarily sought’.

If this suspicion of ‘society’ accounts for the peculiar nature of Mill’s life during the period of his marriage, it also illuminates important aspects of *On Liberty*– which was written during this same period. The animus against society expressed in this book, the exaltation of the individual, the overweening distrust of conformity, convention, and social pressures of all kinds, correspond to the existential reality of his own life. This is not to say that the argument of the book can be explained in terms of his personal situation; only that his personal situation may have made him more receptive to that argument, may have inclined him to a more impassioned and extreme statement of it.

## 4

*On Liberty*, indeed, had its origin in a project that grew out of their special sense of themselves as two beleaguered souls who were alone capable of resisting the pressures of mediocrity and of aspiring to the highest reaches of thought. It was in August 1853, during their first separation since their marriage (his wife had gone to the country to recover from a particularly bad bout of tuberculosis), that Mill alluded to a plan they had evidently discussed before: a volume of essays on subjects of crucial importance which would contain ‘the best we have got to say’. ‘I do not see what living depositary there is likely to be of our thoughts, or who in this weak generation that is growing up will even be capable of thoroughly mastering and assimilating your ideas, much less of reoriginating them – so we must write them and print them, and then they can wait till there are again thinkers.’ Some months later, after they had both suffered serious attacks, he spoke with even greater urgency of the need to get together their ‘best thoughts’ for the edification of posterity: ‘Two years, well employed, would enable us I think to get the most of it into a fit state for printing – if not in the best form for popular effect, yet in the state of concentrated thought – a sort of mental pemmican, which thinkers, when there are any after us, may nourish themselves with and then dilute for other people.’

This image of a ‘mental pemmican’ is truly extraordinary. Like the American Indian pounding together a mixture of meats, nuts and fruits to make the cakes that were his basic staple, so Mill and his wife set about to prepare the concentrated essence of their wisdom, which intellectuals (‘when there are any after us’) could partake of directly, and ordinary people in diluted form. The image is all the more startling because it was unlike Mill, who was generally, indeed excessively, modest about his abilities. But he was never modest about his wife. And it was her health that worried him, the fear of her death that made him so anxious. If she should, by ill-chance, pre-decease him, he assured her he would continue their work as best he could. But that best was not good enough. ‘For even if the wreck I should be could work on with undiminished faculties, my faculties at the best are not adequate to the highest subjects.’ All he could promise to do was to complete the work as she might have written it, ‘for my only rule of life *then* would be what I thought you would wish as it now is what you tell me you wish.’ ‘*I am not fit,*’ he emphasized, ‘to write on anything but the outskirts of the great questions of feeling and life without you to prompt me as well as to keep me right.’

‘Liberty’ was one of eleven subjects tentatively proposed for the volume that was to be their bequest to posterity, their ‘mental pemmican’. It is interesting that it was not high on their original list; nor was it the first to be actually written. But it was probably the only essay of this period that was written, at least in its original version, entirely while they were together. That early draft (which, unfortunately, has not been preserved) was completed some time in 1854. In

December of that year Mill went abroad for an extended period of convalescence (combined with a most arduous tour of sightseeing), and it was then that the subject of liberty first assumed a larger importance in his own mind.

In his *Autobiography* Mill somewhat dramatized the circumstances in which it first occurred to him to expand the essay into a separate book. The idea, he wrote, came to him while he was ‘mounting the steps of the Capitol’— perhaps an unconscious echo of another classic which had been conceived in that historic site: *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Gibbon had decided upon as he sat ‘musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter’. In fact, a letter by Mill to his wife at the time suggested that he had thought of a volume on liberty while he was en route to Rome (the letter itself was written before he had yet visited the Capitol), and that the idea may even have been considered by both of them earlier, probably during the writing of the original essay.

On my way here cogitating thereon [on his writing] I came back to an idea we have talked about and thought that the best thing to write and publish at present would be a volume on Liberty. So many things might be brought into it and nothing seems to me more needed – it is a growing need too, for opinion tends to encroach more on liberty, and almost all the projects of social reformers in these days are really *liberticide* – Comte, particularly so. I wish I had brought with me here the paper on Liberty that I wrote for our volume of Essays – perhaps my dearest will kindly read it through and tell me whether it will do as the foundation of one part of the volume in question – if she thinks so I will *try* to write and publish it in 1856 if my health permits as I hope it will.

After he received the approval of his wife, he became more enthusiastic about the potentialities of the subject and invested it with a greater sense of urgency, not only because of its intrinsic importance but also because of his growing intimations of mortality.

We have got a power of which we must try to make a good use during the few years of life we have left. The more I think of the plan of a volume on Liberty, the more likely it seems to me that it will be read and make a sensation. The title itself with any known name to it would sell an edition. We must cram into it as much as possible of what we wish not to leave unsaid.

Mill returned from that trip (their last prolonged separation) in June 1855. During the following year and a half he worked on *On Liberty*, as well as on his *Autobiography*. In December 1856 he reported to his publisher that he expected to finish it in time for publication the following May. After that he spoke of it occasionally to correspondents, sometimes as if it were completed, at other times as if it were nearly so, first promising it for publication in the winter of 1857–8, then postponing it without explanation. In October 1858 Mill finally retired from the East India Office after thirty-five years of service. He and his wife left for the south of France on the 12th. Within a week Mrs Mill was taken ill, and on 3 November 1858 she died at Avignon. Mill’s first task after the funeral was to purchase a cottage overlooking the graveyard at Avignon where she was buried and to install in it the furniture from the hotel room in which she had died; it was there that he and his stepdaughter retired for several months every year for the remainder of his life. Within a week of his return to England he informed his publisher that *On Liberty* was ready for publication. It finally appeared in February 1859.

The genesis and history of *On Liberty* have an important bearing upon an understanding of the book itself. It is quite evident that on his own Mill would have published it long before, as he would also have published the other essays written or edited during the period of his marriage. That nothing of consequence was published during those seven and a half years, and that within months of his wife's death Mill did start to release one after another of those writings, testifies to the influence of his wife in this matter as in so many others. It was as if she were reluctant to part with the gem that was their life's work, just as she was loath to share their lives with friends or 'society' at large. (It is noteworthy that after her death Mill quickly renewed old friendships, took an active part in public affairs, and even accepted an invitation to stand for Parliament, an offer he had turned down shortly after his marriage.)

That they both looked upon the gem in general, and *On Liberty* in particular, as their 'joint production' is evident from their correspondence as well as from Mill's repeated statements to that effect in his *Autobiography* and in the dedication to *On Liberty*. One may be tempted to discount the latter, with its fulsome tributes to his wife as 'the inspirer, and in part the author, of all that is best in my writings', its assertion that this book, like all his recent works, 'belongs as much to her as to me', and its obeisance before her superior wisdom: 'Were I but capable of interpreting to the world one half the great thoughts and noble feelings which are buried in her grave, I should be the medium of a greater benefit to it, than is ever likely to arise from anything that I can write, unprompted and unassisted by her all but unrivalled wisdom.' Such sentiments, it might be thought, are the conventional pieties of dedications, especially those composed by a recently bereaved and frankly adoring husband. But Mill made the same claims too often, during her lifetime and long afterwards, to permit us to dismiss them so lightly. Moreover he spelled them out in detail, analysed the precise nature of her contributions to their joint works, and specified the particular quality of mind that was 'emphatically hers' and that was especially characteristic of *On Liberty*. The *Autobiography* deserves to be quoted at length because only thus can one appreciate the full extent of his claims on her behalf.

The *Liberty* was more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name, for there was not a sentence of it that was not several times gone through by us together, turned over in many ways, and carefully weeded of any faults, either in thought or expression, that we detected in it. It is in consequence of this that, although it never underwent her final revision, it far surpasses, as a mere specimen of composition, anything which has proceeded from me either before or since. With regard to the thoughts, it is difficult to identify any particular part or element as being more hers than all the rest. The whole mode of thinking of which the book was the expression, was emphatically hers. But I also was so thoroughly imbued with it, that the same thoughts naturally occurred to us both. That I was thus penetrated with it, however, I owe in a great degree to her...

The *Liberty* is likely to survive longer than anything else that I have written (with the possible exception of the *Logic*), because the conjunction of her mind with mine has rendered it a kind of philosophic text-book of a single truth, which the changes progressively taking place in modern society tend to bring out into even stronger relief: the importance, to man and society, of a large variety in types of character, and of giving full freedom to human nature to expand itself in innumerable and conflicting directions...

After my Irreparable loss, one of my earliest cares was to print and publish the treatise, so much of which was the work of her whom I had lost, and consecrate it to her memory. I have made no

alteration or addition to it, nor shall I ever. Though it wants the last touch of her hand, no substitute for that touch shall ever be attempted by mine.

When the *Autobiography* appeared after Mill's death, many of his friends were distressed by what they took to be the excessiveness of his praise — effusions which they thought unworthy of him, reflecting upon his good judgment and common sense. And most biographers and commentators since have ignored these passages, on the tacit assumption that Mill could not have meant them seriously, or that he had been so blinded by love that they are best passed over in embarrassed silence. But this is to confuse two distinct questions: the question of the quality of Mrs Mill's mind (in other passages of the *Autobiography* and on other occasions Mill was even more extravagant, attributing to her a genius of the highest philosophical as well as practical order); and the question of the nature and extent of her influence on his writings. The first question is the more easily answered. It is safe to say that no one could have had all the virtues, and each to an incomparable degree, which he attributed to her. Moreover what evidence we have seems to belie some of these virtues (extreme modesty and selflessness, for example), and fails to bear out others (an intellect unparalleled in her time). But the second question, the problem of her influence, is more difficult. Here, with whatever reservations and qualifications, we may be more inclined to attend to Mill's words — if only because it helps us explain the particular quality of *On Liberty* as well as important discrepancies between *On Liberty* and other of his writings.

In other passages of the *Autobiography*, Mill elucidated the particular 'mode of thinking' that was 'emphatically hers': her 'boldness of speculation', her ability to pierce to the 'very heart and marrow' of every problem, her instinct for 'always seizing the essential idea or principle'. When he said that 'the conjunction of her mind with mine has rendered it a kind of philosophic textbook of a single truth', he meant that his contribution was to make of it a philosophic textbook, hers to provide the single truth.

That 'single truth' had been expressed by Harriet Mill (then Harriet Taylor) long before, in a short, unpublished essay written early in their acquaintance. She had then vigorously attacked 'society' for fostering a 'spirit of conformity' that was fatal to 'individual character'. Although there is no evidence that the essay was actually consulted by Mill at the time he wrote *On Liberty* (the manuscript was, however, available to him and was found among his effects after his death), the similarities are too striking to pass unnoticed. It is not only the main theme of her essay that is so suggestive: the varieties of conformity — religious, political, moral, and social — which are imposed by the 'opinion of Society', the collective 'mass', the 'indolently minded man', and which are implacably hostile to 'any manifestation of mental independence'. Even more revealing are some of the peripheral aspects of her paper. Anyone familiar with *On Liberty* must be struck by her argument for eccentricity: 'If by principle is intended the only useful meaning of the word, accordance of the individual's conduct with the individual's self-formed opinion ... then eccentricity should be prima facie evidence for the existence of principle'; or by her defence of any strong conviction however erroneous it might be: 'The capability of even serious error, proves the capacity for proportionate good. For if anything may be called a principle of nature this seems to be one, that force of any kind has an intuitive tendency towards good'.

The 'single truth' Mill referred to in his *Autobiography* appeared in *On Liberty* as 'one very simple principle'.

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the 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. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised 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. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to someone else. The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

If, as Mill said in the *Autobiography*, every sentence in the book was gone over by his wife and himself, not once but several times, to make certain that it said precisely what they wanted it to convey, this paragraph, which so forthrightly calls attention to itself as containing the essence of the book, is surely deserving of the closest study. It also requires careful reading because it is by now so familiar to us that its meaning can only be recaptured by a deliberate effort. Whether because this passage has been so often anthologized, or because its terms and concepts have become, by a process of cultural osmosis, so much a part of our thinking, we tend to be inured to it, to take it for granted as an unproblematic statement of an eminently reasonable position. Yet it was in Mill's day, and remains so today in spite of its general acceptance, a bold assertion of a very radical doctrine. Some of its boldness is reflected in its language, the repeated use of such words as: one, sole, only, own, absolute, and absolutely. And the final sentence could well stand as the epigraph of modernity: 'Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.'

The rest of the book was by way of elaboration, specification, and illustration of this 'one very simple principle'. In one sphere after another – thought, discussion, and action – Mill sought to establish the necessity and sufficiency of the principle of liberty: that the liberty of the individual should be absolute except in the one case where that liberty did harm to another. On no other ground except harm could any other individual, group of individuals, or society at large presume to interfere with the individual. And interference was defined in the largest possible sense, as including not only physical and legal sanctions but also social pressures, the 'moral coercion of public opinion'. Such sanctions and pressures were illegitimate whether they were directed for or against any religious, intellectual, scientific or moral belief, or any mode of action, conduct, behaviour, or way of life – always with the one exception about harm.

This one qualification involved Mill in difficulties which have troubled commentators and critics, in his time and since. Sometimes Mill used words such as 'concern', 'affect', and 'regard' to express the qualification – as if actions which concerned, affected, or regarded another properly came within the province of society and therefore could be prohibited or discouraged by society, whereas actions which concerned, affected, or regarded only the person performing those actions were entirely within the province of the individual. This neutral set of words – concern, affect and regard – obviously of much larger extension, gave a far greater latitude to

society, than the negatively charged words Mill used on other occasions — harm, hurt, injury, mischief, evil. A closer examination of the context, however, and a consideration of his examples and illustrations, suggests that when Mill said concern, affect, or regard, he meant concern, affect, or regard another *adversely*, harmfully. In this negative sense, the effect was to limit and minimize the occasions when society could legitimately interfere with the liberty of the individual.

Another common problem in the interpretation of *On Liberty* may also have been much exaggerated. It is often assumed that *On Liberty* must be judged as an exercise in the philosophy of utilitarianism, and that its success or failure depends upon its application of utilitarian criteria and the adequacy of those criteria. Thus one critic may object that Mill failed to demonstrate that liberty would necessarily contribute either to the greatest happiness of the individual or to the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Another may object that Mill did just that, and in doing so made of liberty a means rather than an end, thereby demeaning liberty itself. Another may point out the contradictions between the utilitarian and non-utilitarian parts of his argument. And still another may commend him for putting the case for liberty on the only sound, consistent, rational — that is, utilitarian — grounds, thus avoiding such dubious metaphysical principles as natural or absolute rights.

Much of this controversy is beside the point. Whatever Mill's intentions elsewhere — in his book on *Utilitarianism*, for example — it was not his intention here, in *On Liberty*, to rest his case on utilitarian principles. He occasionally, very occasionally, used the word 'utility', more often 'interests'; but he also used such non-utilitarian words as 'rights' and 'development'. In any event, his primary concern was to establish liberty, not utility, as the sole principle governing the relations of the individual and society. If any distinction between means and ends can be made, one might say that he sometimes spoke as though liberty were the means and individuality — not happiness — the end. To be sure, he assumed that 'well-being' was a by-product, perhaps even an essential ingredient, of individuality; but as he interpreted it, well-being was significantly different from happiness, still more from any calculus of pleasure and pain. Had he intended happiness to be the end, he could never have precluded society, as he did in that crucial passage in the introduction, from compelling an individual to do something, or preventing him from doing it, 'because it will make him happier'. In the utilitarian scheme it was precisely the function of the legislator to do that which would make individuals, singly and collectively, happier — which is why Bentham himself had utter contempt for the idea of liberty. Mill, by contrast, insisted that happiness was no more cause for interference with liberty than wisdom or virtue or mere conformity to the conventions of society.

It is also sometimes argued — and this raises a more serious issue that goes to the heart of *On Liberty* — that although Mill professed to make liberty, and its corollary, individuality, the supreme principle governing social relations, he was less interested in that principle itself than in the purposes it could serve, that liberty was the means for the achievement of other ends: truth, or morality, or a fully developed person, or a progressive society. Isolated sentences of *On Liberty* can certainly be read in this sense. And certainly it was Mill's hope, and it constituted a large part of his argument, that liberty and individuality would encourage and ultimately contribute to the promotion of these other ends. But Mill's essential argument — the burden of his book and the message that communicated itself to his contemporaries as well as to later generations — was the need to establish liberty and individuality so firmly and absolutely in and for themselves, to make them so completely the determinants of social policy, the test of all social action, that they would not be subject to other more proximate purposes. In each area he

examined, Mill went out of his way to establish them as the necessary and sufficient ends even if it should appear that they conflicted with other ends.

Mill's case for freedom of discussion, for example, while much concerned with the question of truth, goes so far in making liberty pre-eminent that ultimately truth itself is defined in terms of liberty. Short of denying truth itself — that is, short of a relativism or nihilism that denies the very idea of truth — he could not have done more to assert the absolute supremacy of liberty in matters concerning truth. Mill himself was not a relativist or nihilist; he accepted the idea of objective truth and he believed men to be capable of attaining truths. But this makes his argument even more extraordinary. For at one point after another he made liberty the necessary and sufficient condition for all inquiry. He did this not only in the obvious case where the received opinion might be wholly or partially untrue, so that the liberty of dissenting opinion was required as a corrective to falsity; but also in those cases where the received opinion was wholly true and the dissenting opinion wholly false. Here error itself, even the dissemination of error, became a virtue. Without the competition and collision of opinion, he argued, truth degenerated into 'dead dogma'. He was so impressed by the need for competing opinions, for a vigorous adversary situation, that he was willing to encourage the artificial contrivance of opinion, of erroneous opinion, when such opinion did not naturally exist: 'So essential is this discipline to a real understanding of moral and human subjects, that if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them, and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skilful devil's advocate can conjure up.'

In one sense it can be said that it was for the sake, if not of truth itself, then for the vitality of truth that Mill was urging the largest possible freedom of opinion, including erroneous opinion. But while this was perhaps his intent, the immediate and direct effect of his doctrine was to make liberty rather than truth paramount. It was liberty, not truth, that society was charged with promoting; indeed society was explicitly prohibited from promoting truth itself. And it was liberty, not truth, that was the true mark of individuality; the dissenter from truth, if that truth happened to be a conventional one, was expressing his individuality as surely, perhaps more surely, than the proponent of that truth.

Mill's argument for liberty of action — the greatest possible expression of individuality — exactly paralleled his argument for liberty of discussion. In both cases, liberty rather than some other end was the final principle, the test and arbiter of individual and social behaviour. Just as he assumed that truth would emerge from liberty, so he assumed that all kinds of goods — the fullest development of the individual, virtue, vigour, even genius — would emerge from the cultivation of individuality. But it was individuality itself and the conditions making for individuality — variety, diversity, choice — that were the operative conditions of his doctrine. And just as earlier he defended liberty of discussion even when it meant liberty for error, so here he defended 'eccentricity', 'peculiarity', 'spontaneity', 'originality', 'variety', 'diversity', 'impulse', 'passion', 'experiments of living', and whatever else made for individuality, regardless of the nature or value of any particular eccentricity, peculiarity, impulse, experiment, or expression of individuality. By the same token, the antitheses to these qualities — conformity, obedience, restraint, discipline, custom, tradition, public opinion, and social pressure — were suspect in themselves, regardless of what it was that was being con-formed to, obeyed, restrained, etc. The hope for the future, Mill concluded, and clearly the purpose of his own book, was to convince the 'intelligent part of the public' of the value of individuality *per se* — 'to see that it is good there should be differences, even though not for the better, even though, as it may appear to them, some should be for the worse'.

There is much else in *On Liberty*, especially in the chapter on ‘Applications’, that has provided endless matter for speculation, interpretation, criticism, and commendation.

For over a century, philosophers, social critics, historians, and biographers have argued, often at inordinate length, about the meaning and validity of his doctrine. Yet the controversy has not advanced much beyond the point it reached in Mill’s own time. *On Liberty* did attain, as Mill hoped it would, the status of an instant classic. This meant that it was accepted respectfully, seriously, as one of the most important tracts of the time, some thought of all time. It did not, however, mean that it was received uncritically. On the contrary, it was subjected to the searching inquiry that was the proper due of so worthy a book.

If most of the problems discussed today in connection with *On Liberty* were anticipated by Mill’s contemporaries, one point that was much controverted then is rarely alluded to today. Yet it is at the heart of Mill’s doctrine. This is his description of the state of public opinion in his own time and his predictions about the probable course of its development. The reason he had been provoked to write *On Liberty*, he had said, the reason a new doctrine of liberty had become so urgent, was the new form of tyranny that was confronting mankind. The old, familiar tyranny of despotic government, in which rulers imposed their will upon the ruled, had ceased to be a threat in civilized society boasting representative or popular government, where the interest and will of rulers was becoming more and more identified with the interest and will of the ruled. But it was precisely the rise of popular government that he saw as the pre-condition of a new and more formidable despotism. For the ‘tyranny of the majority’ was now exerting itself not so much in politics as in the entire area of social life. ‘Society is itself the tyrant’, and more oppressive than any tyrant of old because ‘it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself’. It imposes a new ‘despotism of custom’; it dictates its will by means of public opinion; it presumes to tell men what to think and read, how to dress and behave; it sets itself up as the judge of right and wrong, propriety and impropriety; it discourages spontaneity and originality, personal impulses and desires, strong character and unconventional ideas; it is fatal, in short, to individuality. And all of this, Mill predicted, was bound to get worse as the public more and more felt its power and acted upon it. Only the most rigorous doctrine of liberty and the largest assertion of the sovereignty of the individual could prevent England from becoming ‘another China’, the terrible ‘warning example’ of a civilization which from the best of motives, the desire to impose a single model of virtue and wisdom upon everyone, had succeeded in bringing all progress to a halt.

It was this view of a ‘social tyranny’ leading to a fatal decline of individuality that most reviewers challenged. Some questioned the fact of a decline of individuality. Others granted the fact but denied that the tyranny of society was responsible for the decline. Even H. T. Buckle, author of the recently published *History of Civilization in England*(1857), qualified his lavish praise of Mill by entering one small demur. He could not agree that individuality had diminished nor that it was likely to do so in the future. In this respect as in most others, he was confident England was advancing inexorably along the road of reason and progress. But he recognized that other serious thinkers shared Mill’s fears, and that in any event it was salutary to be reminded of a potential evil which might otherwise be ignored.

James Fitzjames Stephen, who is famous for his later book-length attack on Mill, was at first attracted to the thesis of *On Liberty*. Reviewing the book in two successive editions of the *Saturday Review*, he devoted the first part to what amounted to a eulogy of Mill for recalling

Englishmen to the principle of liberty which they had thought 'established beyond the reach of controversy'. This principle, he agreed with Mill, was being undermined by a powerful, irresistible tyranny which was contributing to 'the gradual destruction of all the peculiarities of individuals, and the general adoption of a sort of commonplace ideal of character, to which everyone is forced to conform, by a vast variety of petty sanctions applying with a leaden invariable persistency to all the common actions of life'. The second part of the review, however, as if to gainsay the first, suggested that this 'melancholy' view of affairs (several reviewers used the word melancholy in describing the tone or message of *On Liberty*) was only part of the truth. Individuality was, to be sure, as important as Mill said it was, and intolerance was as abhorrent. But the conformity that society exacted was for the most part of a limited and not very onerous kind. In the most important areas of life, freedom was more available and individuality more widespread than ever before. A person might be obliged to wear a coat of a particular cut, to shave, and to observe certain conventions about what could or could not be said in mixed company. But this was a small 'quit-rent' for the privilege of reading what he pleased, thinking what he liked, educating his children in a manner of his choosing, and adopting any or no religious creed. In important matters such as these, 'there probably never was a time when men who have any sort of originality or independence of character had it in their power to hold the world at arm's length so cheaply'. A fortnight later the *Review* revoked even this small concession about the lack of individuality in the trivial matters of life. It then pointed out that beards were being flaunted, 'unprotected females' were stalking across Europe, tobacco was breaking through the 'decorum of heavy respectability', and in dozens of other ways eccentricity was becoming so commonplace it was 'ceasing to be eccentric'.

Other reviewers found different cause for disagreement. The *National Review*, for example (in an essay possibly written by Walter Bagehot), conceded that public opinion had become more 'homogeneous', reflecting fewer conflicting modes of thought and fewer divergent social types. But so far from interpreting this 'moral monotony' as a threat to liberty, it saw it rather as the necessary and commendable result of the growth of social and political liberty. What were disappearing were not individual varieties of character but sharply demarcated social types, the highly distinctive types associated with class, region, and sect. But it was precisely because individual freedom had increased that these social types had lost their intensity. Nothing had been more 'exigent and irritating in its despotism' than the sectarianism and provincialism of local groups. The decline of the various forms of local despotism, each with its own stringent code of opinion and custom, had indeed led to a greater similarity of thought and behaviour, but this derived from a far larger social base than the old codes and was less oppressive in its effect upon the individual. The *National Review* also warned against Mill's remedy for the loss of individuality; the complete withdrawal of society and public opinion from the affairs of individuals would only aggravate the evil, since an excessive laxity of the social bond was as detrimental to true individuality as an excessive rigour of that bond.

One reviewer objected that a doctrine like Calvinism, which Mill took to be repressive of individuality, actually stimulated individuality by fostering the development of a strong and energetic character. Another quoted against Mill his own essay on Coleridge, which had emphasized the importance of national as well as individual character, and which had made the social bond a necessary ingredient of individual well-being. The same critic insisted that there was no want of freedom of thought for those capable of using it, that any serious thinker could get a hearing for any idea on any subject however unconventional: 'A generation which has produced and which has listened attentively to Mr Carlyle, Mr Froude and Mr Buckle cannot be

charged with shrinking blindly from independence of thought.’ Another reviewer cited the popularity of Mill himself as evidence of both the exercise of independent thought and respect for it. Indeed he found the tone of Mill’s book curiously out of keeping with its source: ‘It might almost indeed have come from the prison-cell of some persecuted thinker bent on making one last protest against the growing tyranny of the public mind, though conscious that his appeal will be in vain – instead of from the pen of a writer who has perhaps exercised more influence over the formation of the philosophical and social principles of cultivated Englishmen than any other man of his generation.’

It was in the same spirit that Macaulay wrote about *On Liberty* in his journal:

What is meant by the complaint that there is no individuality now? Genius takes its own course, as it always did. Bolder invention was never known in science than in our time. The steam-ship, the steam-carriage, the electric telegraph, the gaslights, the new military engines, are instances. Geology is quite a new true science. Phrenology is quite a new false one. Whatever may be thought of the theology, the metaphysics, the political theories of our time, boldness and novelty are not what they want. Comtism, Saint-Simonianism, Fourierism, are absurd enough, but surely they are not indications of a servile respect for usage and authority. Then the clairvoyance, the spirit-rapping, the table-turning, and all those other dotages and knaveries, indicate rather a restless impatience of the beaten paths than a stupid determination to plod on in those paths. Our lighter literature, as far as I know it, is spasmodic and eccentric. Every writer seems to aim at doing something odd – at defying all rules and canons of criticism. The metre must be queer; the diction queer. So great is the taste of oddity that men who have no recommendation but oddity hold a high place in vulgar estimation. I therefore do not at all like to see a man of Mill’s excellent abilities recommending eccentricity as a thing almost good in itself – as tending to prevent us from sinking into that Chinese, that Byzantine, state which I should agree with him in considering a great calamity. He is really crying ‘Fire!’ in Noah’s flood.

## 8

As subsequent editions of *On Liberty* were published – six in Mill’s lifetime, all unchanged, as he had promised in tribute to his wife, by so much as a word – so the commentaries continued to appear, culminating in the full-length critique by James Fitzjames Stephen in 1872, several months before Mill’s death. Only one part, but the larger part, of *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* was specifically concerned with *On Liberty*; the rest dealt more with Mill’s *Utilitarianism* and his essay on the *Subjection of Women*.

It was on utilitarian grounds, or what he took to be such, that Stephen based his criticisms. Since the motives governing human behaviour were pain and pleasure, fear and hope, society had to utilize all its resources to direct those motives towards socially desirable ends. It had not only a right but a duty to invoke whatever social and religious sanctions were available to it: legal punishment and the fear of damnation, social approbation and the hope for salvation. Mill’s doctrine, a form of moral laissez-fairism in which each individual was encouraged to do as he liked so long as he did not injure another, failed to distinguish between good and bad, let alone to give effect to that distinction. It was also a denial of the whole of history, in which the progress of civilization depended upon the expedient use of moral, religious, and legal coercion. As wisdom and virtue required the active support of society, so, Stephen reasoned, did truth. Had Mill been content to argue that in that time and place the discussion of most controversial questions should be completely free and without legal restraint, Stephen would have had no objection. But in trying to establish freedom of discussion as the pre-requisite of truth, Mill was

doing more than asserting the desirability of a particular social policy; he was making a meta-physical statement about the nature of truth, assuming truth to be necessarily inconsistent with authority and necessarily the product of free discussion, an assumption which Stephen found to be highly dubious. Equally dubious was the supposition that free discussion was a means of vitalizing truth; as often as not, such discussion had a debilitating and enervating effect. Nor was Mill warranted in making the liberty of action essential to the development of individuality, nor in attributing any merit to individuality itself. ‘Though goodness is various,’ Stephen observed, ‘variety is not in itself good.’ He quoted an example his brother, Leslie Stephen, had used in a recent article on Mill: ‘A nation in which everybody was sober would be a happier, better, and more progressive, though a less diversified, nation than one in which half the members were sober and the other half habitual drunkards.’ Mill, Stephen concluded, had elevated liberty and individuality to the status of absolute ends instead of judging them pragmatically, expedientially, in terms of their utility under particular conditions. Liberty was no more good in and of itself than was fire; like fire it was ‘both good and bad according to time, place, and circumstance’.

From the perspective of *On Liberty*, Stephen’s book seems to be propounding something like a counter-doctrine to liberty — an invitation, perhaps, to the very ‘social tyranny’ Mill had feared. In fact, it was only in theory and on principle that Stephen allowed to society a large latitude regarding moral, religious, and social sanctions. In practice, he was not counselling that society avail itself of this latitude; on the contrary, he believed that England at that time had no great need for such sanctions. What disturbed him about Mill’s doctrine was the possibility that its adoption would leave society impotent in those situations where there was a genuine need for social action. Implicit too was the possibility that the withdrawal of social sanctions against any particular belief or act would be interpreted as a sanctioning of that belief or act, a licence to do that which society could not prohibit.

Stephen’s book provoked another round of controversy, his Hobbesian view of human nature and society alienating many who might have been responsive to a different kind of critique. Mill himself, who had always found Stephen arrogant and ‘brutal’, thought the book would prove more damaging to Stephen than to himself. He ‘does not know what he is arguing against,’ Mill said, ‘and is more likely to repel than to attract people.’ Whatever the justice of Mill’s comment, or of Stephen’s criticisms of Mill, it was *On Liberty* that continued to be read and reprinted while *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity* soon lapsed into obscurity, enjoying a *sub rosa* reputation among a few scholars and thinkers.

A century after the publication of *On Liberty*, the controversy between Mill and Stephen surfaced again when H. L. A. Hart, then Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford, remarked upon the striking similarity between Stephen’s arguments and those recently advanced by Lord Devlin in an essay on *The Enforcement of Morals*. The occasion for Devlin’s essay was the Report of the Wolfenden Commission recommending the legalization of homosexuality between consenting adults. Against the Commission’s claim that private morality and immorality were ‘not the law’s business’, Devlin argued that ‘the suppression of vice is as much the law’s business as the suppression of subversive activities; it is no more possible to define a sphere of private morality than it is to define one of private subversive activity’. Hart, in turn, defending the Wolfenden Commission against Devlin, pointed out that its principles were essentially those of Mill and Devlin’s those of Stephen. (When these parallels were brought to his attention, Devlin tried to find a copy of the book that had so curiously anticipated his own position. It was only after some

time and with great difficulty that he located a tattered copy in the Holborn Public Library; the book was in such bad condition that it was held together with an elastic band.)

It is unfortunate that other more eminent Victorians did not write extended critiques of *On Liberty*, for Stephen's brand of utilitarianism was not the only basis from which *On Liberty* could be criticized. Carlyle, for example, would have judged it from a very different perspective. In a letter to his brother, he gave his typically candid and caustic opinion of the book: 'In my life I never read a serious, ingenious, clear, logical Essay with more perfect and profound dissent from the basis it rests upon, and most of the conclusions it arrives at. Very strange to me indeed; a curious monition to me what a world we are in! As if it were a sin to control, or coerce into better methods, human swine in any way ... *Ach Gott in Himmel!*'

If John Henry Newman has left no such memorable comment on *On Liberty*, it was not because he was indifferent to it, but because it was a minor skirmish in a much larger war he was waging. His quarrel with liberalism in the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, published in 1864, directed itself against an attitude of mind that long antedated Mill, that went back at least to the earliest Christian heresies. His attack in the appendix to the second edition of the *Apologia* was directed primarily against religious liberalism, but it applied *a fortiori* to secular liberal-ism. Most of the propositions of the liberal heresy, as Newman enumerated them, could have been taken almost verbatim from *On Liberty* :

No one can believe what he does not understand.

No theological doctrine is anything more than an opinion which happens to be held by bodies of men.

It is dishonest in a man to make an act of faith in what he has not had brought home to him by actual proof.

It is immoral in a man to believe more than he can spontaneously receive as being congenial to his moral and mental nature.

There is a right of Private Judgment: that is, there is no existing authority on earth competent to interfere with the liberty of individuals in reasoning and judging for themselves about the Bible and its contents, as they severally please.

There are rights of conscience such, that everyone may lawfully advance a claim to profess and teach what is false and wrong in matters, religious, social, and moral, provided that to his private conscience it seems absolutely true and right.

There is no such thing as a national or state conscience.

The civil power has no positive duty, in a normal state of things, to maintain religious truth.

Matthew Arnold was another eminent Victorian whose work contained an implicit rather than overt critique of *On Liberty*. Oddly enough, his first reading of the book had left him rather favourably disposed to it. 'It is worth reading attentively,' he told his sister, 'being one of the few books that inculcate tolerance in an unalarming and inoffensive way.' On another occasion he distinguished Mill from the crasser utilitarians who were 'doomed to sterility'; unlike them, Mill had some perception of truths that transcended utility. It was this that made him a 'writer of

distinguished mark and influence', although not quite a 'great writer'. In *Culture and Anarchy*, published a decade after *On Liberty*, Arnold took a less benign view of Mill. Although he mentioned Mill only once and *On Liberty* not at all, his book was a powerful indictment of the doctrine Mill had advanced. The title of the second chapter of *Culture and Anarchy*, 'Doing as One Likes', clearly echoed one of the principles of *On Liberty*: 'liberty of tastes and pursuits, of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character, of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow.' To Arnold the principle that every Englishman has the 'right to do what he likes' meant in practice the 'right to march where he likes, enter where he likes, hoot as he likes, threaten as he likes, smash as he likes'. Nor was Arnold better disposed to the idea that everyone has the right to say what he likes, for this involved the same provocation to anarchy and the same subversion of culture: 'The aspirations of culture are not satisfied, unless what men say, when they may say what they like, is worth saying, – has good in it, and more good than bad.'

Individuality as a good in itself was as antipathetical to Arnold as liberty conceived as a good in itself. This notion of individuality violated his sense of tradition and authority, his respect for establishments (religious and political), his conception of the positive role of the state and of the integral relationship of the individual to both society and the state. But above all it was his idea of culture that militated against Mill's idea of liberty. Mill would have agreed with Arnold that culture involved 'criticism', the 'free play of mind', a disinterested 'curiosity'. But where Mill would have made of these neutral concepts capable of leading men in any direction, towards any end, Arnold infused them from the outset with substance and purpose. For Arnold the play of mind was free, curiosity was disinterested, criticism was serious, when and only when they were at the service of 'right reason', 'excellence', 'sweetness and light', 'total perfection'. In effect, virtue and wisdom, rather than liberty and individuality, were the proper ends of man. If anarchy was so fearful, it was not because it subverted this or that institution but because it subverted the culture that alone distinguished man from the animal and material world.

One must, then, look not only to reviews and critiques for the contemporary response to *On Liberty*, but also to alternative systems of thought: the *Weltanschauung* of a Carlyle, the theology of a Newman, the philosophy of an Arnold. When all these are taken into account – the unwritten, so to speak, as well as the written reviews – one can only conclude that the reaction to *On Liberty* was anything but uniformly favourable, that there were large reservations both about the argument and the basic principle of *On Liberty*.

Yet in spite of this critical response, *On Liberty* had an enormous influence upon contemporary thought. John Morley, who had been a student at Oxford at the time, later asserted: 'I do not know whether then or at any other time so short a book ever instantly produced so wide and so important an effect on contemporary thought as did Mill's *On Liberty* in that day of intellectual and social fermentation.' Thomas Hardy recalled that students in the mid-sixties knew *On Liberty* 'almost by heart'. And Frederic Harrison, who was himself a Comtean and therefore not much of a liberal, attributed to it a considerable practical as well as intellectual influence:

It is certain that the little book produced a profound impression on contemporary thought, and had an extraordinary success with the public. It has been read by hundreds of thousands, and, to some of the most vigorous and most conscientious spirits amongst us, it became a sort of gospel ... It was the code of many thoughtful writers and several influential politicians. It undoubtedly contributed to the practical programmes of Liberals and Radicals for the generation that saw its

birth; and the statute book bears many traces of its influence over the sphere and duties of government.

Harrison may well have overstated its practical influence. Indeed he himself qualified his remarks at one point by suggesting that after 1870 Mill's influence 'waned', which considerably narrows the 'generation' that presumably accepted *On Liberty* as 'gospel'. And his statement that it had contributed to the 'practical programmes of Liberals and Radicals' is difficult to accept in view of the fact that most of those programmes were designed to expand rather than restrict the area of government and social control. Yet Harrison's impressions, contradictory as they were, were typical. It is curious to find, again and again in the testimony of contemporaries, assertions about the large influence exercised by *On Liberty*, combined with expressions of personal doubts and reservations.

Charles Kingsley, for example, is often quoted as having said, and not retrospectively but at the time, that he chanced upon *On Liberty* in a bookstore, was so caught up in it that he read it then and there, and that it made him 'a clearer-headed and braver-minded man on the spot'.<sup>[72]</sup> But it never made him so clear-headed and brave-minded as to convert him to the kind of liberalism Mill was advocating. Although Kingsley was at this time less militant a socialist than he had been, he never completely abandoned his faith in socialism or embraced the individualism of *On Liberty*. (Moreover his decline of socialist zeal had set in long before his reading of *On Liberty*.) His later comment on Mill is in curious contrast to his earlier remark about clear-headedness and brave-mindedness. 'When I look at his cold, clear-cut face,' he said, after visiting Mill in 1869, 'I think there is a whole hell beneath him, of which he knows nothing, and so there may be a whole heaven above him.'

John Morley, who was one of Mill's most devoted disciples, tried to account for the ambivalent response to *On Liberty* — the sense that it was enormously important and influential, and at the same time the admission that it had logical and practical flaws — by suggesting that its moral appeal was so powerful as to make its flaws seem inconsequential. One might add that its moral appeal was all the more powerful precisely because of its flaws: its over-simplicity, its reductivism, its attempt to subsume a large and complicated set of problems under 'one very simple principle'. There is a boldness about simplicity, even over-simplicity, that is morally attractive, as if to defy reality, to deny complexity, is an assertion of moral superiority, of the power of mind over matter, of will over all the mundane and ignoble circumstances governing our lives.

In the century since Mill's death, the social reality has become infinitely more complicated, and to that extent Mill's principle of liberty would seem to be less applicable than ever before. Yet even as liberals have acquiesced in an unprecedented extension of social and government control, they feel more than ever committed to the principle of liberty *per se*. This principle has led to an almost schizophrenic situation, in which liberals find themselves supporting legislation and government intervention to promote economic security, or material welfare, or racial equality, or whatever else they deem to be of pressing social concern, while at the same time denying to society and government any authority over individuals in matters affecting their moral and spiritual welfare — pornography and obscenity, sexual practices and social customs, manners and morals. Pressed to justify this apparent discrepancy, liberals invoke something akin to Mill's distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions. In the first instance, they argue, social intervention is required because the individual is not in control of his situation and therefore may be injured by the actions of another: a car manufacturer who

has not provided seat belts, an employer who offers less than a prescribed wage, a school district zoned in such a way as to segregate the races. In the second instance, it is said, social intervention is not warranted because the individual is and should be entirely in control of himself, free to indulge in whatever activities he desires, to engage in any ‘experiment of living’.

That present-day liberalism has gone much further than Mill in enlarging the sphere of the other-regarding is obvious enough. Mill, after all, was a laissez-fairist, and while he admitted exceptions to that doctrine (most notably to provide for compulsory education and to prohibit the marriage of those without the means of supporting a family), he admitted them as exceptions rather than the rule. It is less obvious, but none the less true, that we have also gone beyond Mill in respect to the self-regarding sphere. Mill did try to maintain, although not always successfully, a distinction we are more and more losing sight of, the distinction between the private and the public; by his account, a private act of immorality would fall within the private domain whereas the same act committed in public would constitute an ‘offence against decency’. He also maintained the distinction — again one we are in danger of losing — between morality and immorality. If he insisted upon the legality of private immoral acts, he did not deny the fact of their immorality. He did not argue, as many liberals do today, that there is no objective distinction between, for example, pornography and non-pornography, that such judgements are entirely subjective, entirely in the eyes of the beholder or a fiat of social convention. Mill himself was no moral relativist. His only purpose was to ensure that society be neutral in respect to private acts of immorality.

Yet in making so strong a case for social neutrality, Mill contributed to an atmosphere of moral relativism in which people call in question not only the legitimacy of social interference but also the legitimacy of moral judgement. And this, in turn, has led, and increasingly in recent years, to a denial of the distinction between private and public. If it is not possible to call private acts immoral, by what right, it is asked, can these acts be regarded as ‘offences against decency’ when they are committed in public?

There is a logic of ideas which does not necessarily conform to the logic of the philosopher. Society carries out ideas in ways their originator may not have foreseen nor intended. This is the meaning of Acton’s admonition that men are more often the godparents of ideas than their legitimate parents. But even as godparents they have a large responsibility for their progeny. And it is in this sense that we are today living out the logic of much of *On Liberty* — with all the contradictions, inconsistencies, and difficulties Mill’s contemporaries found when they read the book over a century ago. If today most of us seem to be less aware of those difficulties, it is because the essential doctrine of *On Liberty*, the primacy of the idea of liberty, has become so much a part of our intellectual heritage that we are no longer aware of its assumptions, we no longer regard it as problematic.

Lord Asquith once described Mill — the Mill of the *Logic* and *Political Economy* — as the ‘Purveyor-general of Thought for the early Victorians’. *On Liberty* is not now, as the *Logic* and *Political Economy* were then, required reading for all university students or the subject of earnest disputation among thoughtful men. But it has become, perhaps by a process of cultural assimilation, the gospel of our own time even more than of Mill’s day. Like all gospels, it is frequently violated in practice and even sometimes defied in principle. But liberty remains, for good and bad, the only moral principle that commands general assent in the western world. In this sense Mill has become the ‘Purveyor-general of Thought’ for generations which have long since discarded much of their Victorian heritage.

## On Liberty by J.S. Mill - An Introduction

Published in 1859, *On Liberty* was perhaps John Stuart Mill's finest and most controversial work. Released shortly after his beloved wife, Harriet's death, *On Liberty* is Mill at his finest arguing for the principles he had espoused over his fifty years of life. Before she died, Mill and his wife carefully analyzed each page of the work, perfecting it to their satisfaction.

Mill therefore dedicated this book to his wife's memory, he considered it his most important work.

Much of the impetus for this book was created between dialogues between he and his wife shared. Before their marriage, they would write each other long letters, lamenting the state of affairs in England and the world. One of their main complaints was the declining amount of original, bold thinkers in society, they both saw the numerous advantages in a society that encouraged the pursuit of dreams. This is clearly reflected in *On Liberty* as Mill denounces society for its need for conformity. Indeed, another issue that instigated some of the theories and commentary in *On Liberty* was Mill's fear of middle class conformism which plagued him in his entire life's work; this fear was probably instigated by Mill's study of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*. The strong presence of Harriet's opinion was also felt in a lot of the issues that Mill supported in *On Liberty* such as women's rights and educational standards. In his stint in Parliament, Mill was an fervent advocate of these issues, earning a reputation of being a radical liberal.

In nineteenth century England in which Mill lived, there was a struggle between increasing religious strictness and the rebellion that accompanied that strictness. Mill's work was definitely indicative of this struggle as he was not a supporter of religion being treated as a doctrine without the requirement of personal integrity. Mill wrote *On Liberty* to emphasize one principle: that individuals had absolute freedom to do what he wants if his actions are self-regarding.

The first edition of *On Liberty* sold out and a second edition followed in late 1859 and a third in 1864. Although the circulation was fairly broad, it met with very harsh reviews and a religious backlash against Mill for referring to the lack of effectiveness of Christianity as a doctrine. Overall, the way that Mill tried to incorporate the importance of individuality with a sense of societal obligation is looked upon as admirable but much of the deductions and reasoning is discounted as faulty theory in today's analyses.

## On Liberty - Short Summary

In the beginning, the retention of liberty was necessary to protect against political tyranny of overzealous rulers. Citizens began to realize that in order to achieve their absolute liberty,

government would have to begin working as an instrument, a delegate of the people's will. Whatever the majority opinion was would have to be the decision made by the government so the citizenry would never feel as though their best interests weren't being served. However, Mill cites this so-called victory of the people is nothing of the sort, it simply paved the way for a new type of tyranny: the tyranny of prevailing opinion.

This tyranny is even more evil, according to Mill because it is pervasive, penetrating the intricacies of life and social interaction and silencing the minority's voice.

This mute portion of the community may have the wrong, right, or part of the truth in its opinion it doesn't matter according to Mill. No matter what they have to contribute, it is extremely helpful to the community. The majority opinion is often faulted because it is biased with self-interest and personal convictions. There is no way for the majority to know that they are right and they owe it to the whole of society to listen to all arguments because it is clear that human opinion is fallible. Because of this great possibility of errors in judgment and an individual's right to autonomy, Mill believes that society should not impose its values on anyone.

A person should have the right to act as they wish as long as the negative consequences of such actions are only felt by that person. However, if a person's act is not self-regarding and adversely affects others, a person should be held accountable for that act. Mill thinks that individual autonomy is opposite to the instincts of society, he asserts that society encourages and rewards conformity.

Mill thinks that society, highly liable to be influenced and wrong, should not serve as the impetus for the government's actions. Public opinion is a dangerous basis for the government to act upon because there are countless numbers of citizens who are notable to have their voices heard. The danger that lies in the government acting in response to the public opinion can be seen by looking at the past where actions that had the support of a consensus of the people are now deemed to be infringements upon human liberty. The truth, says Mill, does not always make itself apparent and we should not rely on an supposed eventual revelation of the truth to show us the best way to proceed.

Mill refutes the claim that religion should play a role in determining the weight of an individual's opinion, stating that the greatest moral leaders often did not believe in Christianity, but their work was just as valuable. Following a religious doctrine, according to Mill, does not make a person morally sound, as an individual must strike a balance between religion, faith and their own personal morality.

The very capricious nature of humanity seems to be something that Mill values highly. Mill believes that human desires are not to be suppressed and molded to fit a doctrine or societal ideal, but rather followed and explored. He decrees that anything that suppresses the ability of humans to be unique is tyrannical, whether it is a code of conduct or a religion. The original thought and spontaneity that people can have are immeasurably important for new discoveries and new truths. Geniuses are products of this spontaneous thought, they are not conformists, but those that have been allowed to wander with their ideas and explore the possibilities. Eccentricity, something that is often frowned upon by society, is the key to genius behavior. It is that departure from the normal that allows new perspectives to be seen and a happier society to exist.

Mill does not absolve individuals completely from obligations to society, however. He does acknowledge that in exchange for the protection that society offers, individuals show have a

modicum of respect for their fellow members of society. However, if they don't choose to do this, they are eligible to be punished either in legal or social circles. For those who injure society in ways that cannot be punished in a court of law, Mill says that society is more than welcome to use its opinions and judgment as punishment. It is the duty of society to warn others about a person who is harmful to others; coercion is allowed when it is meant to assist others in the retention of their liberty.

If a member of society refuses to abide by self-regarding principles, then Mill asserts society cannot coerce that person to reform or coerce other society members to avoid that person. Society can hold individual negative opinions of a such a person and advise others of that person's faults. This is the only punishment inflicted on a person who does harmful things to themselves - the penalty of public opinion. Mill contends such a person is obviously already receiving punishment as a result of the action they have inflicted on themselves.

Society is not exempt from its duty to the individual, either. Mill contends that society has the responsibility to develop its children into rational and moral human beings. If a society finds itself with a preponderance of incompetent, immoral citizens, then it only has itself to blame. After a person's developmental adolescence phase, however, society's responsibility to influence the individual stops and society has no right to tell the individual what are the correct decisions.

Mill does some preemptive strikes on potential detractors from his work as well. To the assertion that no one's actions affect solely themselves, Mill agrees in part. However, he says that society only has the right to interfere when the effect of a person's actions brings a strong risk of or actual damage. If a person's actions have little significance to society, it is actually in society's best interest to preserve personal liberty rather than to obsess over an individual's action.

Mill applies his principles to real life situations as well. He states that trading is a public act while consuming is not; therefore selling of certain products can be regulated more than the actual use of them. In competitive situations, Mill states that the harm principle should not be enforced at all times because when there is a winner, there will inevitably be a loser who is harmed. However, the winner should not be punished for winning and harming the losing party if all measures taken to win were indeed moral. As far as the practice of taxing goods that are harmful, Mill concedes that this is okay because it is better to tax nonessential goods than essential ones. Mill does not ascribe to the principle of complete self-ownership as some may suspect he would his idea of the importance of liberty supersedes individual rights in the case of a person who would want to sell himself into slavery. On the subject of education, Mill believes in universal education standards for all children and a parent's inherent duty to ensure that their child receives an excellent education.

The basic underlying theme in Mill's work is the lack of trust that can be placed in the government. He cannot condone any measures that would give the government the power of prevention or undue influence over individual lives. He believes that adding any power to the structure of the government is a dangerous act and most of his ideas can be seen as extensions of his desire to make the government more of an advisory and organizational body. For Mill, the ideal government would be a central body that while respected, simply gives strong advisories to local officials who are committed to upholding the interests of their constituency and hearing all opinions expressed. Mill firmly believes that the strength and capability of a citizenry is linked to the success of a state and instead of exterminating the desires and abilities of its

## On Liberty : Detailed Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 1

#### Introductory

Mill begins in his explaining that his purpose in this essay is to discover the maximum power that society can exercise over an individual and study the struggle between Liberty and Authority. In earlier times, liberty was utilized as protection against political tyranny because rulers were endowed with the power to both suppress the rights of would be aggressors and their own citizenry. As time elapsed however, the citizens began to want a limit to be placed on the power of the government in order to achieve their liberty.

This attempt to ensure liberty involved two steps: 1) obtaining political rights that were safe against all forms of tyranny and 2) implementing the safeguard of community consent in the form of a mandate or body that would guard against an abuse of power. The first step was easily obtained, but the second step was met with more opposition by governments. After a while, people began to see an importance in having their government act as their delegates, a democratic body who would make decisions according to what the people wanted. This development was seen as the end to tyranny by many how could people oppress themselves? “Self-government” and “the power of the people over themselves” were common ways to refer to the new, empowered system of government. Mill refuses these characterizations; rather he asserts that the people who have the power are not necessarily those that are affected by the power. He goes on to conclude that the will of the people is simply the will of the majority of the active governed people. Mill asserts that this type of tyranny, tyranny of the majority, is just as evil as any other form of political despotism. In fact, he believes that it is often much worse than other forms of despotism because it is more pervasive and able to infiltrate our lives and social interactions. Mill concludes that there needs to be protection against this tyranny of prevailing opinion.

Mill acknowledges that finding the correct limit on the majority’s influence is a difficult task, especially since most people have different perceptions of the correct limit to be implemented. Each person, Mill claims, will think that their own opinion on a matter is right, but their reasoning is affected by their own self-interest and the external and internal pressures that they may or may not be aware of. As a result, several principles determine the standards of a country’s people. First of all, the moral standards and self-perceptions of the higher class in a society will likely have the most influence on the morality of their country. Secondly, men are likely to follow the mandates of their religion and this adds to the rules of conduct for society. Finally, the basic interests of society influence moral sentiments as a whole Mill points out that it isn’t the actual interests that influence, but rather the empathy and apathy that stem from these interests. From these principles, Mill states that it is society’s likes and dislikes that create most of the rules for the citizenry. Oftentimes, the question of what society dislikes or likes wrongly supersedes the question of whether society should implement these preferences as laws. An exception to this is in regards to religion, where society was refused the right to uniformly implement its preferences due to the concept of liberty and freedom, along with the minority religious factions that left few majorities to enforce their will. However, Mill claims that there is really no complete religious freedom because although there is religious tolerance, there is still little accommodation for religious dissenters where the majority of a society has a strong religious preference.

Mill speaks about his native country, England, and how people resent the government telling its citizens what to do because the opinion exists that government's opinion is usually not the same as or in the best interest of the public. The English people didn't know what it was like to have their vote reflected in the country's decisions, but they did believe that government shouldn't exercise control in areas that they hadn't previously. They also had the tendency to decide the government's worth by its adherence to their own personal preferences, some wanted the government to do good things while rectifying bad things and some wanted the government to not interfere no matter the cost to society.

Mill believes that the extent to which society can impose its influence on an individual is to ensure the self-protection of others. If a person places himself in a position that is dangerous solely to him, society has no right to interfere according to Mill. Just because society believes an action is good, it can not be imposed on its citizens, because each citizen is autonomous. Mill does not apply this independence to small children or those who cannot take care of themselves – Mill extends this to undeveloped races that need to be improved by society's rules – but once manhood or womanhood is reached, there is no reason for society to impose its values on an adult.

If a person inflicts harm on others, he is subject to legal prosecution, the consequences of his actions. Mill asserts that a person should be held accountable for both the direct harm to another person or inaction that results in harm being done to an individual. Mill believes human liberty should encompass 1) the inward domain of consciousness, 2) liberty of thought and feeling 3) liberty of expressing and publishing opinions, 4) liberty of tastes and pursuits, and 5) the liberty of individuals to join a collective group.

He believes that his expressed ideas form the opposite of what society's instincts dictate. Society is based largely on the art of conformity in opinion and action and Mill only sees the imposition of society on the individuals growing over time.

### Analysis

In perhaps his most passionate work, Englishman John Stuart Mill's writes about the rights of individuals to do what they wish with their own life as long as the ramifications from their actions don't harm other people. This type of advocacy for an autonomous life for all citizens is typical of Mill's Utilitarian beliefs. Utilitarianism supports each person having the ability to maximize their own utility (happiness) as long as they don't negatively affect others on their path to happiness. A paradoxical issue that often arises with Mill's *On Liberty* regards the concept of an absolute principle. Mill asserts that it is absolutely necessary that a society adopt an autonomic view in order for utility to be achieved, but this mandate goes against Mill's other assertion that coercion has no place in a free society.

Mill is definitely skeptical of the power of democracies to liberate; he takes the position that this so-called control of the people is more dangerous than a tyrannical government. Democracies, he contends, are more subtle in their influence but more complete in their infiltration into society. When it appears that the people are making their own rules, it is easier for citizens to follow along, subscribing to a false sense of empowerment. Mill contends that in truth, democracy is tyranny in numbers, where the active political members of a society can dictate what is best for all and the majority's decision is rendered as law.

Mill was a liberal thinker and his thoughts shocked a world where democratic governments were seen as the utmost in political freedom. It could be of important note that Mill himself, was a powerful member of the British government as the chief civil servant of the East India Company which controlled India, then a British colony. Truly, Mill was speaking from a position of authority while he was supporting an extremely laissez-faire government. In 1850's Britain, the time and place in which Mill composed *On Liberty*, the middle class had just received the right to vote twenty years earlier. The working class and women were still not allowed to have their votes count in their government. Mill was observing while his country's government evolved into a democratic structure and undoubtedly was using his observations as his stimulation for this work.

In this first chapter, one can see Mill's strong aversion to conformity, which will play an important role in this essay. He is particularly averse to the middle-class, which he views as the ultimate conformers. He believes that conformity is society's default, the easiest, and hence most popular action for citizens to take.

## Chapter 2

### On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion

Mill asserts that the government shouldn't act at the beckon of the people, the public shouldn't have the power of coercion over their elected governing body. The government is much more dangerous when dependent on unreliable public opinion. Indeed, public opinion is the popular sentiment of mankind, but forming this opinion requires the silencing of a lot of voices. This omission of minority opinions is very hurtful to the public whether the opinions are wrong or right. If a silenced opinion is right, obviously the public misses out on the truth. However, if the suppressed opinion is wrong, the danger in its loss is often more grave. If a minority opinion can be wrong, it leads to "the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth."

The majority opinion is not guaranteed to be correct; it can be wrong for the majority has no true authority and no absolute certainty. The fallibility of majority opinions is exemplified by looking at past history, according to Mill. Past popular opinion has often been rejected by present-day society, and there is no guarantee that present popular opinion won't also be rejected by the future. Individuals can only form the most intelligent, educated opinions that they are capable of, but they shouldn't force those opinions on the whole of society unless they are certain of their truth. Mill believes that in order to make good decisions, men must use discussion and experience. Men who are fair keep their mind open to all ideas and search for opposing arguments, realizing the necessity of a devil's advocate. To Mill, a so-called fact must be held up to debate or "it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth." Mill points out that even in the doctrine of Christianity, which is assumed by Christians to be correct, the importance to listening to all sides is expressed. Mill also points out that a man doesn't have to be evil to argue against basic beliefs upheld by society, invoking Socrates as proof that people can misjudge even the most competent and well-intentioned minds. On the other hand, men can misjudge potential good ideas for society. Mill refers to Marcus Aurelius, who, although a good man, wrongly judged and refuted Christianity. Contrary to popular opinion, Mill states that the truth does not always emerge in the end; men don't necessarily support the truth with more passion than they support falsehoods.

Also, Mill points to the fact that a belief in God shouldn't be the litmus test for someone's trustworthiness. If an Atheist tells the truth and admits that he doesn't believe in God, he is not

trusted but if he lies and says he has faith, he will be trusted obviously the wrong result. Mill also refutes the importance of doctrine, particularly religious ones. He believes that very few people actually follow the doctrine to its letter, rather they just follow the laws dictated by society, only living up to the standards that society imposes and not the higher ones include in doctrines.

Mill points to a final type of dissenting opinion that isn't necessarily right or wrong, but nonetheless helpful. It is the type of opinion that provides part of the truth that is missing in public opinion. This augmentation effect is the most probable state of affairs, states Mill. He says that both popular and opposing opinions are rarely completely right and a balance between the two should be reached in order for the real truth to be found. Too often, says Mill, either opinion is preferred in its entirety and the other opinion that holds part of the truth is neglected. Mill extends this theory to religion, saying that those who adhere to the Bible as the complete truth are misinterpreting its intent to supplement the strong personal ethics and character already assumed to be present. To make his point that morality and religion do not necessarily go hand in hand, Mill asserts that some of the most moral individuals were indeed not Christians.

### Analysis

In this chapter, Mill's ideas on society are tempered with his views on religion and its importance in the search for truth. Although Mill believes in the sovereignty of the individual, he refutes the idea that government should adhere to popular opinion. He doesn't believe that the government should ever stop victimless free expression even if public opinion deems it necessary. Mill's extreme liberalism is reflected in his statement that mankind does not even have the authority to silence one opinion, much less the whole of the minority. Mill's argument of human fallibility is strong – Mill asserts that all opinions need to be heard in order for anyone to decide what is the truth. However, this argument based on infallibility seems to be an infinite one, a student of Mill would wonder where the indecision would end, after how much deliberation would a truth be validated? How would one ever be certain of the truth and what kind of chaos would the resulting uncertainty yield?

The basis of Mill's idea is the argument that has been present in many liberation movements throughout history before and after Mill's time the argument that issues should not be forever closed for debate once a consensus has been reached. The Women's Suffrage Movement, Civil Rights Movement, and the Vietnam War are all examples of where the minority opinion, which needed to be heard, was suppressed in error.

Indeed, probably the most interesting aspect of Mill's work in this chapter is his views on religion. While he doesn't discount the importance of Christian faith, he seems to place it in perspective. He doesn't believe that one should solely adhere to the doctrine of religion and ignore the importance of personal integrity standing on its own merit. Mill's inference that Christianity was more of a dead dogma than a living truth created great controversy at the time of *On Liberty's* publication. Also, he addresses the bias that many non-Christians face when their opinions are discounted because of their religious beliefs by stating the fact that many of the most brilliant moral men were indeed, refuters of the Christian faith. He doesn't accept the correlation between religious belief and honesty because he believes that honesty is an intrinsic factor of personal quality, not religion.

## Chapter 3

## Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being

Mill begins this chapter with placing limitations on the personal freedom that he has so far proposed. He professes his belief in autonomy except when a person proves to be placing others in danger with their actions; he asserts that “no one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions.” He thinks that personal liberty is threatened by the lack of respect society gives individual autonomy the majority often sees no reason why everyone shouldn’t be happy with their decisions. Mill asserts that humanity wasn’t made to simply conform to each other, for if that were the case the only skill humans would need would be the art of imitation. Mill also speaks about the importance of a person to have his own desires and impulses. Strong impulses produce energy, the fuel for change and activity, both good and bad.

Mill disagrees with the Calvinistic theory that humans can only be good through compromise and that “whatever is not a duty, is a sin.” In Calvinism, it is best to eliminate individuality and the evil of human nature because the only necessary act of humanity is to devote one’s self to God. Mill thinks this restrictive view of humanity doesn’t do justice to the inner good of man and the likelihood that God created man with potential assuming that he would use it. In more extreme terms, Mill states that any will, religious or riot, that suppresses individuality is tyrannical.

Mill talks about the importance of original thought and spontaneity in human society. Original thinkers can seek, discover and spread word about truths that otherwise wouldn’t be found. Genius minds are usually unique members of society whose intelligence and thoughts don’t fit into the usual mold that society has formed. Mill believes that eccentricity is linked closely to character, genius, and morality, and fears that there it is increasingly lacking in society, citing that “spontaneity forms no part of the ideal of the majority of moral and social reformers.”

People are inherently different and should be allowed to explore these differences, according to Mill. People thrive and fail under the same circumstances – making all people uniform is a detriment to their unique qualities, according to Mill. He thinks that society in general doesn’t give enough importance to spontaneous action. However, he doesn’t think that individuality should come at all costs, individuals should temper their self-interest so that the more capable people in society don’t trample on the less capable.

Mill thinks that even if people don’t adhere to this theory of freedom and spontaneity, they will learn something from the exposure they have to the environment that advocates such behavior. Also, a more effective government of developed citizens will result from a society that is free to circulate new ideas and challenge the majority’s opinions. Mill contends that this type of development will produce a happier society where people are allowed to follow their desires rather than being forced to settle for the majority’s weak passions. Mill believes that suppressed impulses result in the redirection of strong passions towards less constructive things. Finally, Mill believes that all of society would benefit from an emphasis on individuality because it would prevent society from falling into a dangerous status quo.

## Analysis

Mill’s argument in this chapter strikes a balance between his utilitarian and liberal philosophies. Mill believes that in a society that encourages individual liberty, both driven individuals and those satisfied with the status quo could reach their maximum level of happiness. However, also in this chapter, Mill lays the groundwork under which society can

impose itself on a person who wrongly invokes his/her liberty. Although he gives each person the complete freedom to follow the goals that maximize their happiness, he believes that society should restrain that spontaneity and individuality so it doesn't adversely affect others.

Mill encourages eccentricity among individuals as he sees it as the key ingredient to genius. He doesn't believe that society should reign in a person with different interests and passions to conform to the mainstream principles. Once again, Mill's words are applied in a religious context. He cites the uselessness and harm of society mandating religious preferences when the end result is a society loosely tied to religion with more attention focused on other, less moral aspects of the community.

## Chapter 4

### Of the Limits to the Authority of Society over the Individual

Mill contends that there needs to be a clear distinction between where individual liberty takes precedence and where society has the right to intervene. He refutes the Lockean argument that society is based upon a mutual contract but he concurs that once entered into society, an individual has an obligation to not violate others' rights, to contribute to the community, and not to hurt others in exchange for the protection and benefits that society offers.

For people who injure others in ways that cannot be punished by law, Mill believes that society's opinion and judgment will serve as punishment. In fact, Mill encourages public scrutiny and criticism of a harmful individual. He explains that society has the duty to use their impression of an individual and warn others of a person's potential danger. This is one of the rare instances where Mill permits coercion.

However, when a person is only hurting himself or herself, Mill says that people can advise him/her to adopt self-regarding virtues but ultimately, each person has the complete freedom to make their own decision. If a person does not adopt self-regarding qualities, society cannot publicly denounce him/her, although they can hold their own personal negative opinions. These private opinions are what ultimately may hurt a person who is not pursuing what society perceives as his/her own best interests. This is referred to as a natural penalty that is incurred by bad self-regarding interests. In addition to that natural penalty, Mill states that in a harmful self-regarding action, the only harmed person is the perpetrator who in effect, is giving and receiving his own punishment.

Mill agrees in part to the counterargument against his philosophy stating that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to believe that any action can solely affect the agent and will not be relevant to the community. However, he asserts that only when the action brings on the risk or actuality of public damage does society have the right to punish the perpetrator. Mill gives the example of a drunk man who shouldn't be punished for his intoxication unless he is a policeman or similar protector of society on duty and unable to fulfill his duties. In Mill's opinion, if a person's actions have little significance to society, then it is in the best interest: of society to allow basic human liberties to prevail.

Mill places the burden of responsibility on society for the development of its members. Since society is responsible for children during their developing years, Mill believes that a significant number of immoral, irrational citizens reflect poorly and largely on society itself. In addition, Mill utilizes some real life examples in the illustration of his principles. He draws the line between selling and consuming; he points to consuming as a self-regarding act while selling

affects the society it is catering to and can be regulated by that society under rational reasoning. He also asserts that workers should not be forced to take Sundays off, all workers should be able to choose one day to take off rather than adhere to the religious ideal of Sunday as a day of rest. To the Mormon tradition of polygamy, Mill, while denouncing the practice as a contract that acts against a person's liberty, concedes that all members of the contract are parties under their own will, so they should not be interfered with.

### Analysis

In this chapter, Mill anticipates and addresses some arguments against his theories. After his initial hard-line stance, Mill softens a bit as he attempts to clear up inconsistencies regarding his ideal of liberty and individuality. He finally makes a dependent connection between society and man, after denouncing the relationship in the early parts of the book. He makes people partially beholden to society and society responsible for the early development of their citizens a strange thing for a man who sings the praises of autonomy.

Mill preempts the obvious question: "aren't all individuals' actions assured to have some effect on society?" by affirming that indeed they are. He doesn't deny the fact that some overlap is unavoidable but refutes the fact that this overlap has to be impactful. This, while perhaps a weak argument, is based on his idea that the danger of society's imposition upon individual liberty is much greater than the danger of individuals' deeds. Mill is much more eager to accept small ramifications of individual actions than to have society impose its will on individuals just to please society's moral standards and ideal of rationality.

It is a slight paradox that Mill places the responsibility of raising responsible children in society's hands while cowers at the idea that that same society could set the standards for all its citizens. In addition, Mill places more pressure of conduct on the individual as he opens the door for society to pass judgment on a person who doesn't have sufficient regard for him/herself and regards this judgment as the natural penalty for irrational self-regarding acts.

## Chapter 5

### Applications

In this chapter, Mill enumerates how all of his theories and ideas for humankind can and should be applied in real-life scenarios and explains when liberty has to be sacrificed. He recaps his two main maxims: one, that the individual should not be punished for their actions if they are only affecting themselves and two, that for actions that do adversely affect others, society should hold the agent responsible for his/her actions and take the necessary step to punish them, be it in a courtroom or a social setting.

Mill is careful to explain an exception to punishing someone for inflicting harm. "In many cases, an individual, in pursuing a legitimate object, necessarily and therefore legitimately causes pain or loss to others, or intercepts a good which they had a reasonable hope of obtaining." A person exercising their liberty to do the best they can should not be ostracized because others could not do as well the only scenario in which punishment is justifiable, according to Mill, is when the means used to win are underhanded and deprive others of a fair opportunity.

In the realm of the marketplace, Mill reiterates that trade is indeed, a societal art that involves everyone and should be under the guises of society to a certain extent. However, Mill has ideas about what constitutes the limits of the government's power in this area. He does not believe

that the government should have the power of prevention, just the right to warn and punish its citizens. He thinks that giving the government the right to forbid the sale of potentially dangerous items is giving the government too much power over individuals' lives. On items such as poison, Mill asserts that a person could have ill or good motivations in its purchase and that it is not the government's place to assume that there are evil motives. However, for this innocuous person, Mill proposes that precautions should be taken. Dangerous products should be labeled as such, giving the buyer the knowledge they need to make a rational decision, and buyers should be required their personal information such as name, address and why they are purchasing a particular item. This is not an infringement on liberty, according to Mill, but a precautionary measure for the whole of society.

In criminal activities, Mill believes the solicitation of another to commit a crime against humanity is not exempt from society's judgment because the person solicited and the victims of the crime are being harmed by the instigator. He also believes that fornication and gambling cannot be stopped if all parties involved are consensual and reaping the same benefit. However, running a public gambling house or brothel is not within the understanding of society because these things promote bad moral behavior publicly and adversely affect others. Mill doesn't frown upon a so-called "sin tax", although he states that it is a slight infringement on liberty, he sees it as an inevitable one; tariffs are bound to be raised, so why not raise the price on items that people don't need to survive?

Mill decries any sense of a person's right to sell him/herself into slavery. He states "by selling himself for a slave, he abdicates his liberty; he foregoes any future use of it beyond that single act...the principle of freedom cannot require that he should be free not to be free." Self-ownership only goes as far as morality and the maintenance of liberty, both of which are severely compromised under slavery. Mill also deals with Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt's assertion that all contracts between individuals should be broken upon either party's dissatisfaction, contracts such as marriage licenses would dissolve upon an exercise of liberty. Mill does not adhere to this ideal, he views von Humboldt's statement as narrow, not looking at the intricacies of contracts in society. Mill takes into consideration that with a contract like marriage, "a new series of moral obligation arises on his part toward that person, which may possibly be overruled, but cannot be ignored" While Mill thinks that legally, parties should have the right to break contracts if it a self-regarding act, Mill believes that it is morally lacking and a misuse of liberty to frivolously void such a contract.

Mill believes that liberty, along with the state's power, is often misconstrued. Mill thinks that the great disparity in the power held between husband and wife should be fixed by the state by implementing laws that ensure equal protection for women. He also believes that a parent is committing a crime if he/she does not obtain a good education for their child. Furthermore, he thinks that the state should enforce mandatory universal education for all, forcing children to meet comprehension standards after the end of each grade. He argues that this would lessen the influence of factions who argue over what should be taught to whom; religious groups and other minorities would be able to teach their children what they wished in addition to the standard curriculum. Continuing with the idea of parental obligations, Mill points to the decision to have a child as one of an extremely serious one, requiring a lot of rationality and ability. Mill thinks that potential parents should have to prove that they are financially ready to have a child. This requirement, in Mill's eyes, is not an infringement upon liberty because it is a precaution against a child coming into the world with no means to eat or live a happy life – that child would be adversely affected by its parents' decision so that decision is susceptible to public scrutiny.

Even when there is no chance of liberty being infringed upon, Mill thinks that the government interference should be limited overall. If an individual is better suited to perform a task than the government, he/she should certainly be allowed. If the individuals cannot perform a task as well as the government, they should be allowed to do the task anyway, according to Mill, because it will broaden the individuals' knowledge and bring some new perspective to issues. The most important reason to Mill that the government should not be given the freedom to interfere is that it would be harmful to all to bolster the government's power with no laymen to challenge their actions. Mill thinks that it is necessary for society to be competent and able to organize a original, innovative political structure. Under an increasingly empowered government, however, Mill sees no possibility for such a society to develop.

Overall, Mill thinks that government should be centralized and serve in an advisory capacity to localities, whose political leaders would be beholden to the citizenry. Mill thinks that such a system would provide, intelligent decisions and ensure liberty for all citizens while maintaining a strong sense of order and consequences. Mill thinks that the worst thing for a government to do is to make its constituency diminutive and reliant, for this passive and ineffectual behavior will breed no great accomplishments or goals for the state.

### Analysis

Mill's, overview of his strategy is quite insightful, although at times highly contradictory with the principles he has set forth in earlier points in his work. Through the application of his ideas to everyday events, a clearer view is obtained of what Mill's thoughts are about the direction society should go in.

In this chapter, Mill has a very pronounced sense, of paranoia about the government and the dangers of empowering the government,. However, he himself makes some broad assumptions about people and their desires that borders on dangerously presumptive. In dealing with marketplace issues, Mill finds himself in a difficult situation, having to deal with the sale of potentially dangerous materials and draw the line between precautionary and preventive. Although Mill calls it an effectual prohibition for some people, he surprisingly endorses "sin taxes", a measure that appears to be at odds with his idea of autonomy and personal freedom. He also endorses warning labels, assuming that everyone who buys poison wants to be warned of its possible effects.

Mill's analysis of selling oneself into slavery is interesting. He believes it to be wrong because it takes away the very liberty that all self-regarding acts invoke. However, it seems to be disingenuous to suggest that a person can harm oneself but cannot sell oneself. Another intriguing analysis deals with education and its necessity. Mill calls it a father's duty to provide education for his child and that there should be universally enforced educational standards. His explanation for this is that a parent has no right to take away the liberty of his child by stripping him of an education that would give him the opportunity to succeed. This is probably because of personal bias, Mill's father was determined to give Mill a great education among the finest minds in the world and Mill felt deeply that every parent should be as committed to education as his own father was.

In this chapter, Mill suggests several protective measures that are used in modern-day society; the foreshadowing of present-day America and the world is definitely notable. He argues that for the sale of items that could possibly be used for criminal endeavors, a registration should take place for the purchaser. Also, he speaks of the advantage of a standardized proficiency test to

ensure that all students are learning at similar levels. Mill is definitely ahead of his time in many respects, he also appears to be an advocate for women's rights and legislation, undoubtedly inspired by his recently deceased wife's perspective. Mill's ideas on crime, education, gender issues and government are all based on his ongoing struggle between an individuals' right to liberty and the right of society to restrain those who cannot restrain themselves.

## Major Themes in 'On Liberty' by J.S. Mill

### The Struggle between Liberty and Authority:

Individuals have often felt as though their rights were being infringed upon by an overzealous government and have fought for the ability to have their government act they wish. Individual liberties have been trampled on by various governments and this fear of authority has resulted in democracies, where the majority of the people get to decide what actions are best for the state.

### Tyranny of the Majority:

With democracies, it is supposed that the will of the people is the impetus for the government's actions and that people are participating in a type of self-governing state. However, says Mill, this is not true, democracies enable a tyranny of the majority where public opinion stomps out the voices of the minority groups and pays their needs and opinions no mind. Mill thinks that this tyranny is the gravest sort, and seeks to find the maximum amount that society can impose itself on an individual while still maintaining personal liberty.

### Self-Regarding Actions and Autonomy:

A person whose actions only affect himself is not eligible to be coerced or punished for his deeds. According to Mill, it is not society's duty or even its right to protect a person from him or herself. The only punishment that can result from a self-regarding action is the weight of individual public opinion and the consequence of the actual action itself.

### The Veracity of Public Opinion:

There is no guarantee, and even a strong possibility that what the majority deems to be best indeed is not. The majority's opinion is tainted with motives and biases that shouldn't come into play when deciding what is best for society as a whole. An analysis of past events, wars, and discriminations can show us that sometimes the majority's opinion is not rooted in good faith. Allowing the minority's opinion to be involved in debates and decisions can only be a good thing, no matter what the opinion is.

### Religion and Liberty:

Supporters of religion tend to view those who are less religious as less credible in their ideas for society. Mill refutes this theory and says that religious affiliation or lack thereof should play no role in the ability of a person to make an informed opinion about what is best for all society the truth of matters. Mill points to nonreligious men with impeccable morals as proof that religious affiliation does not indicate trustworthiness.

### Coercion:

Mill is against societal or individual coercion in all cases, except when a person's actions are harming others. He thinks it a clear abuse of liberty when coercion is used to persuade a person to stop an action that only affects himself. When a person is injuring other members of society, however, Mill thinks it fine that he be coerced to stop his actions and punished in a court of law if applicable. Mill also believes that the public has the duty to warn each other about a dangerous person and coerce one another to stay avoid him/her.

### Society's Obligation:

Society has an obligation to throw its influence towards those who are unable to process information and exercise their own liberty in a rational way. Examples of these individuals are children and undeveloped minds. Society has an obligation to children to try their best to make them rational, reasonable adults who want to follow their passions and be dynamic personalities. Part of this obligation, one that is shared by parents, is providing a strong education Mill suggests that there be universal educational standards for all children so none fall behind.

### Danger in the Government:

Mill is very fearful of the power of the government and all his theories are molded not to give the government any more power of persuasion or procedure. Mill thinks that governments should not be allowed to make the final decisions regarding its constituency, that rather local officials should be appointed and with the central government advice, but most importantly with the input of all citizens, make the decisions.

## Critics on "On Liberty"

'The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest variety.'

In taking, for his most famous Essay, this motto from Wilhelm von Humboldt, Mill is defining the sense in which he proposes to discuss 'Liberty'. The argument follows on from where we have just left off: he is going to discuss in more detail, but also with more philosophical breadth, 'the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual'. Once again we find Mill wrestling with paradoxes, and defending his principles

against their own consequences. Indeed, this Essay is the palmary instance of that posture in him, for the menace here is the very liberal-democratic state which he and his party had toiled to create. Mill was discovering (without so formulating it) the truth of the 'dialectical' principle, that a historical 'moment' tends to generate its own negation; out of the very liberty for which he had striven had proceeded a new sort of tyranny. The old *laissez-faire* liberty had produced an order in which only the privileged few were really free; the rest of mankind were free only to sell their labour or starve. To remedy this, the principle of 'equality' had been invoked, and the franchise had been in wider (not yet 'widest') commonalty spread. To remedy the yet remaining evils of free competition Mill had been prepared, as we saw, to admit a considerable measure of State Socialism. But all this meant more and more legislation, more and more interference with the individual; could it be that liberty and equality were incompatible? In working for equality, were we sacrificing something still more valuable? What Mill would have thought of our present-day 'democracy' one trembles to imagine; it is sufficiently remarkable to find him, already in 1859, aware of the impending tyranny of 'collective mediocrity'. 'The tendency of all the changes taking place in the world', he says, 'is to strengthen society, and diminish the power of the individual.' And this tendency profoundly disturbed him, for the most deeply seated of his **unconscious** beliefs (on the *conscious* level he sometimes denied it) was that the 'natural' was better than the contrived, and that the individual was a 'natural' unit, while society was 'artificial'. I believe that there was a conflict between Mill's unspoken and his explicit assumptions on the 'natural', for if 'Nature' were all that he says of her in his posthumous Essay of that title (see below, pp. 177 ff.), he would have no right to defend the individual as part of the natural order. This latent respect for Nature, this predisposition to 'let be', was part of Mill's eighteenth century inheritance. The Essay *On Liberty*, although written in the heart of the Victorian age, still has about it the ring of mental fight, the heroic tone of 1789. One might have supposed that in 1859 no new *Areopagitica* was called for, but Mill was far from seeing the matter in that light. To him, mid-Victorian England seemed 'not a place of mental freedom', and, as we have seen, he feared that other freedoms were about to perish. *On Liberty*, then, is a veritable *Areopagitica*, and its strenuous tone explicable, because Mill felt himself to be attacking two kinds of tyranny in succession: in the first part, that of intellectual torpor and intolerance; in the second, the monstrous off-spring of the democratic Frankenstein.

The sap runs freely and strongly throughout the first section, which deals with liberty of thought and discussion.

'Discussion' was indeed the breath of life to Mill, who as a youth had formed a debating circle which met twice a week from 8.30 a.m. until 10. He craved for the free play of mind upon all subjects, but found that in England it was considered ill-bred to discuss serious topics in society; France was much more congenial in this respect. His secluded up-bringing, and his father's ascendant influence, had implanted deep within him the feeling that English thought, like English society, universities and religion, was still in the grip of sinister conservatism; he could therefore see himself as an eighteenth century 'philosophe' attacking the infamous old Goliath. For Mill, the 'great' moments in history were those when ideas and assumptions were being thoroughly overhauled, when discussion most mightily raged, and 'the yoke of authority was broken': he specifies the Reformation, the late eighteenth century in France, and the 'Goethian and Fichtean period' in Germany, as epochs when Europe was mentally awake. One gathers that he would have been prepared to add to these the early centuries of Christianity, when the faith was still fighting for existence, and when its adherents were consequently aware of what they were fighting for. But these impulses are now well-nigh spent; there is

in England now ‘a tacit convention that principles are not to be disputed’, and there has descended upon us the ‘deep slumber of a decided opinion’.

‘A state of things in which a large portion of the most active and inquiring intellects find it advisable to keep the general principles and grounds of their convictions within their own breasts, and attempt, in what they address to the public, to fit as much as they can of their own conclusions to premises which they have internally renounced, cannot send forth the open, fearless characters, and logical, consistent intellects who once adorned the thinking world.’

In face of the continued pressure of an older civilization, with its social inequalities and privileges, its traditional religion and morality, Mill and the middle-class radicals could still feel themselves to be in the vanguard of human advance, and still feel that their interests were those of the masses of mankind (though the masses had a way of not quite seeing this).

I will briefly rehearse the argument. If we try to suppress opinions: (i) The opinion to be suppressed *may* be true. Were not Socrates and Christ put to death as heretics, blasphemers and corrupters of morality? Did not Marcus Aurelius, a better ‘Christian’ than nearly all so-called Christian rulers, persecute Christianity? It is a fallacy to suppose that ‘Truth’ as such has any special survival-value; ‘history teems with instances of truth put down by persecution’.

Even though the alleged heresy be indeed an error, and the orthodox opinion true, yet if the orthodox never hear their views questioned, they themselves will not understand on what grounds they hold them. ‘He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that’ ; absence of discussion weakens belief. Creeds are operative when they are being affirmed against opposition, and mere formal husks when they have long been accepted. The doctrines of the Sermon on the Mount are considered sacred, but they now produce little effect ‘beyond what is caused by mere listening to words so amiable and bland’; the real allegiance of the modern Christian is paid to worldly interests: he believes his doctrines ‘just up to the point at which it is usual to act upon them’.

The conflicting doctrines may share the truth between them, and in this case it may be that the minority-opinion contains just that part of it which is ignored by the majority. One-sidedness is an inherent defect of the human mind itself, and revolutions and improvements in opinion are not simple replacements of error by truth, but rather the rise of one part of truth and the obscuration of another—the new fragment being simply ‘more adapted to the needs of the time, than that which it displaces’. We have noticed how Mill saw in the contrasted world-views of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a type of this one-sidedness, and with this in mind he here says that the ‘paradoxes of Rousseau’ burst, ‘like a bombshell’, in the midst of eighteenth century opinion, ‘forcing its elements to recombine in a better form and with additional ingredients’. In the great practical concerns of life, above all in politics, ‘truth’ is a ‘reconciling and combining of opposites’, and if one of two opinions has a better claim to be countenanced it is that which at the moment happens to be in a minority. An interesting part of this discussion, for our present purpose, occurs where Mill considers Christian ethics, which are reputed to contain no half-truth, but the whole truth, in matters of conduct. Here he clearly feels that he is vindicating a minority view against an all-but unanimous prejudice. After distinguishing between Gospel Christianity, which never purported to teach a complete ethical system, and ecclesiastical Christianity, which did, he declares

‘that it is, in many important points, incomplete and one-sided, and that unless ideas and feelings, not sanctioned by it, had contributed to the formation of European life and character, human affairs would have been in a worse condition than they now are.’

What ‘ideas and feelings’? Magnanimity, he replies: high-mindedness, sense of personal dignity, sense of honour, energetic pursuit of good, sense of duty to mankind without thought of heavenly reward, sense of duty to the State; in a word, the pagan virtues, and their modern counterparts as represented in the ideals of chivalry and the ‘gentleman’. These and such-like secular standards must be combined with those of Christianity to produce the moral regeneration of mankind. One may suppose that this is the kind of sentiment which James Mill had advised his son not to express, but which, now that the latter is actually burning his boats, he glories in avowing.

Nothing in Mill is more profound or of more lasting value than this first section. Yet if his grave ghost should revisit this troubled world of a hundred years later, we should have to pose it with another problem about minority opinion: what, we should ask, if the whole *raison-d’ être* of a given minority should be its determination to force its views at all cost upon the majority, and its readiness to imprison and murder all who will not submit? Shall that minority be tolerated, lest its suppression may mean the loss of some neglected fragment of truth? Perhaps even Mill would have hesitated here; he might, however, have said: suppress the party by all means, but enquire what hideous maladjustment has made its appearance possible, and remedy *that*.

The argument of the second section (which I have partly anticipated, and will therefore treat more summarily) is: given intellectual liberty, men must also be free to plan their own lives as they think fit; liberty in living must go with liberty in thinking—provided always that the individual does not make himself a nuisance to other people. It is here that Mill examines, on the principles already explained, the limits of the power of the State over the individual, the ruling assumption being the characteristic one, that ‘leaving people to themselves is always better, *ceteris paribus*, than controlling them’. In order to draw his boundary line Mill makes a distinction between self-regarding and public actions; individuals must be unhampered in all that affects themselves only, but the State may intervene to prevent anti-social behaviour. The distinction is hard to maintain, though Mill’s ‘salutary jealousy of social interference’ will find a response in those today who dislike State regimentation and dread its continual and mounting encroachments. Mill would have occupied stronger ground here if he had been a Christian; he could then have given precise meaning to what was evidently his thought, that for the soul’s health there must be spiritual sanctuaries, as well as Nature-Preserves, where the govern-mental writ does not run. Mill, as I have suggested, is here faced with some highly unwelcome results of the very movement for which he had always stood; democracy, or the rule of the average mediocre man, has now triumphed, and from this very ‘liberty’ is proceeding a new bondage: ‘society has now fairly got the better of individuality’. ‘The general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind.’ Genius, and originality of thought or conduct, ‘can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom’, and this freedom is vanishing from our modern mass-civilization. ‘The only power deserving the name is that of masses, and of governments which make themselves the organ of the tendencies and instincts of masses’—that is (in England), of the middle-class or ‘collective mediocrity’. Mill is driven, like Carlyle, to fly for rescue to ‘the highly-gifted and instructed One or Few’ to guide the ‘Sovereign Many’—though he explicitly discountenances ‘the sort of “hero-worship” which applauds the strong man of genius for forcibly seizing on the government of the world and making it do his bidding in spite of itself’. No, there must be no Fuhrers; the wise and the noble

must only ‘point out the way’. Unfortunately, ‘energetic characters on any large scale are becoming merely traditional’, and we are daily approaching an almost Chinese uniformity. Mill would not have found the ‘energetic characters’ of a hundred years later at all to his taste, and he would have been amazed to find that their aim was precisely to produce such uniformities, and to produce them by methods of ‘interference’ which would have reduced him to suicide. I will conclude by quoting his memorable warning against the evils of standardization :

‘The circumstances which surround different classes and individuals, and shape their characters, are daily becoming more assimilated. Formerly, different ranks, different neighbourhoods, different trades and professions, lived in what might be called different worlds; at present to a great degree in the same. Comparatively speaking, they now read the same things, listen to the same things, see the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights and liberties, and the same means of asserting them. Great as are the differences of position which remain, they are nothing to those which have ceased. And the assimilation is still proceeding. All the political changes of the age promote it, since they all tend to raise the low and to lower the high. Every extension of education promotes it, because education brings people under common influences, and gives them access to the general stock of facts and sentiments. Improvement in the means of communication promotes it, by bringing the inhabitants of distant places into personal contact, and keeping up a rapid flow of changes of residence between one place and another. The increase of commerce and manufactures promotes it, by diffusing more widely the advantages of easy circumstances, and by opening all objects of ambition, even the highest, to general competition, whereby the desire of rising becomes no longer the character of a particular class, but of all classes. A more powerful agency than even all these, in bringing about a general similarity among mankind, is the complete establishment, in this and other free countries, of the ascendancy of public opinion in the State....

‘The combination of all these causes forms so great a mass of influences hostile to Individuality, that it is not easy to see how it can stand its ground. It will do so with increasing difficulty, unless the intelligent part of the public can be made to feel its value. If the claims of Individuality are ever to be asserted, the time is now, while much is wanting to complete the enforced assimilation.’

The ‘time is now’ 1949, not 1859, and the assimilation has gone incalculably further—too far for remedy, Mill would perhaps have thought. However, if anything is ‘still wanting to complete it’ (as we must hope), his words are many times more urgent than ever.

David Daiches

John Stuart Mill (1806–73) had an altogether different sort of mind—lucid, humane, analytic—and his writings, while they possess no distinctive literary qualities, no rhetorical *élan* or imaginative power, are of importance as illustrating Victorian reforming thought at its most reasonable and most disinterested. Educated from infancy by his father, the utilitarian reformer James Mill, to be a learned and astute propagandist and explicator of those views on human welfare and on politics which he and Jeremy Bentham had developed together—views which represented an ingenious but curiously mechanical application of contemporary psychological notions to construct a theory of happiness and a political system based on the “greatest happiness” principle—he suddenly discovered, early in his twenty-first year, the barrenness of a purely analytic approach to the most profound human problems. In his posthumously

published *Autobiography* (1873) he records the depressing and paralyzing effect of this discovery. "All those to whom I looked up, were of opinion that the pleasure of sympathy with human beings, and the feelings which made the good of others, and especially of mankind on a large scale, the object of existence, were the greatest and surest source of happiness. Of the truth of this I was convinced, but to know that a feeling would make me happy if I had it, did not give me the feeling. My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of my intellectual cultivation had made precocious and premature analysis the inveterate habit of my mind." It was the poetry of Wordsworth that was largely responsible for rescuing Mill from the dark night of the soul into which his sense of the barrenness of his intellectual activities had plunged him. The result was enlarged sympathies and the awareness of the inadequacy of any system which postulated the calculated pursuit of an arithmetically defined happiness as the proper end of individual or political activity. "If I am asked, what system of political philosophy I substituted for that which, as a philosophy, I had abandoned, I answer, no system: only a conviction that the true system was something much more complex and many-sided than I had previously had any idea of, and that its office was to supply, not a set of model institutions, but principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstances might be deduced. The influences of European ... thought, and especially those of the reaction of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth, were now streaming in upon me. They came from various quarters: from the writings of Coleridge, ... ; from what I had read of Goethe; from Carlyle's early reviews in the *Edinburgh and Foreign Review*, though for a long time I saw nothing in these (as my father saw nothing in them to the last) but insane rhapsody ... I looked forward ... to a future which shall unite the best qualities of the critical with the best qualities of the organic periods; unchecked liberty of thought, unbounded freedom of individual action in all modes not hurtful to others; but also, convictions as to what is right and wrong, useful and pernicious, deeply engrave on the feelings by early education and general unanimity of sentiment, and so firmly grounded in reason and in the true exigencies of life, that they shall not, like all former and present creeds, religious, ethical, and political, require to be thrown off and replaced by others.

This deepening of Mills' thought never led him to transcendentalism or mysticism, but enabled him to reconsider political and philosophical problems in such a way as to give the utilitarian approach by far its most persuasive and deeply thought out expression. His writings on political and philosophical subjects—*On Liberty*, 1869; *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform*, 1859; *Representative Government*, 1861; *Utilitarianism*, 1863; *The Subjection of Women*, 1869; *Three Essays on Religion*, 1874—show an awareness of the complexity and variety of human experience and the differences in quality as well as quantity between different kinds of human happiness that are far removed from the confident and narrow logic of Benthamism. Though an inveterate individualist and a profound believer in freedom of speech and in the right and even the value of personal eccentricity, he recognized the limits of *laissez faire* and the necessity for a careful balance between freedom of individual action on the one hand and protective and beneficent governmental action on the other. If he was still more optimistic about the nature of man than the survivors of the age of concentration camps and gas chambers can allow themselves to be, he nevertheless formulated many of the principles which still underlie the thinking of humane and moderate reformers who believe that men can plan their progress to a better world without reliance on supernatural sanctions. He believed passionately in the equality of the sexes, and he believed with equal passion in education as the only proper foundation for an expanding democracy. His mind was essentially secular, and he was agnostic without being hostile to religion, in whose historical and psychological aspects he

was much interested. Though in his later years friendly with Carlyle and influenced by him, he remained in cast of mind and basic ideas fundamentally antithetical to him, while to Carlyle, Mill remained “a logic-chopping engine.” In general it can be said that Mill represented nineteenth-century secular wisdom in the form in which it was most easily assimilated by the twentieth century.

### 1. John Stuart Mill’s ‘On Liberty’ is an attempt which broadens the meaning of utility and show that individuality must be protected and nurtured?

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was an English philosopher and economist. He wrote one of his most famous essays, *On liberty*, in 1859. Mill was raised by his father, James Mill, to be a strict Utilitarian. Mill’s childhood was rigid, and he suffered a nervous breakdown at twenty-one when he began to question some of his beliefs. Mill later struggled with his sense that Utilitarianism was too unemotional and that it failed to capture or understand the “higher” pleasures.

*On Liberty* can be understood as an attempt to broaden the meaning of utility and show that Utilitarianism can provide a strong protection of rights. The essay also reflects Mill’s passionate belief that individuality is something that should be protected and nurtured. As such, the essay illustrates his disgust at how he believed society squelches nonconformity. *On Liberty* is just one example of the social and political writings of Mill. Other works of his include, *Considerations on Representative Government*, *On the Subjection of Women* and *The Principles of Political Economy*.

*On Liberty* should at least partly be understood as a product of and response to the Victorian period of England during which it was written. This period was characterized by a particular set of social values (often called Victorian values) that emphasized hard work, thrift and “respectable” comportment and behavior. While there was some criticism of these values at the time, they enjoyed wide-spread appeal. The Victorian period was also characterized by a series of reform movements, such as the temperance movement. These movements often reflected a desire to promote Victorian values throughout society. Mill found these social institutions to be restrictive, however, and saw their all-consuming nature as a profound problem for mankind.

### Briefly explain the major terms in Mill’s ‘On Liberty’.

Liberty – For Mill, liberty encompasses both civil and social liberty, which he defines as “the nature and limits of the power of which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual.” Mill argues that society can only exert authority over behavior that harms other people, anything else is an abrogation of individual freedom.

**Tyranny of the majority** – This is the concept that in a democratic state the majority of people can impose its will on a minority. Mill believes this behavior is “tyrannical” when it violates a claim that the minority has as a member of society.

**Social Contract** - This reflects the idea that society is something that people either explicitly or implicitly agreed to be part of. Social contract theory was first formulated by Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, and defines rights as those things that people would have agreed to have protected by society, and duties as those things people would have agreed to take on as obligations, had they been present at the formation of the state.

**Infallible** - Incapable of making a mistake or being wrong.

**Fallible** - Capable of making mistakes and being wrong.

Q. 3. Write a detailed critical analysis of chapter 1 “introductory”?

Mill’s introduction is one of the most important parts of his essay as it contains the basic structure of his argument, as well as some of his major presuppositions. Mill describes civilization as a struggle between society and the individual about which should have control over the individual’s actions. Mill sees the world as tipping toward a balance in which society, through laws and public opinion, has far more power over the actions and thoughts of an individual than an individual has over himself. Mill rejects this status arguing that society should have control over only those actions that directly affect it or those actions that harm some of its members. Mill argues that an individual harming himself or acting against his own good provides insufficient reason for others to interfere. His essay will be a description of why this is the case.

It is important to note that in rejecting social interference with individual thought and activity, Mill is not just writing about laws, but also about “moral reprobation.” An individual or group cannot rightly punish a person’s behavior by, for example, treating him as an enemy, if his actions only affect himself. In rejecting the legitimacy of coercive opinion, Mill drastically broadens the scope of his claims. It is worth paying attention in later chapters to why Mill is so critical of public disapproval of behavior, and to the avenues that Mill does leave open for people to express disapproval of actions they dislike.

The idea of progress is integral to Mill’s essay, and this chapter reflects a few of his ideas on the subject. Mill believes that individuals and society as a whole can improve themselves. Fitting with this idea, he considers different societies to exist on a clear hierarchy of value: barbaric societies are childlike, without the necessary tools of self-government. They must be governed like children, so that they can eventually become capable of exercising their liberty. Yet while Mill considers progress and civilization to be definite goals, he also expresses concern that with progress comes conformity. In later chapters he will try to show that such conformity could undermine further individual and social improvement.

In this introduction, Mill explicitly calls his justification of liberty utilitarian. In doing so, he says outright that his defense of liberty will not be based on natural rights, such as those proposed by Locke or on metaphysical claims, such as those proposed by Kant. Rather, Mill bases his argument on what is best for mankind, and in doing so suggests that his arguments will show the individual and social benefits of human liberty. In later chapters, it is worthwhile to examine when and how Mill makes broad utilitarian arguments for liberty and to similarly look for instances when Mill resorts to non-utilitarian arguments.

## **Write a detailed critical analysis of chapter 2 “of the liberty of thought and discussion”?**

In Chapter 2, Mill looks exclusively at issues of freedom of thought and of opinion. It is significant that he attempts to justify the importance of this freedom by showing its social benefits—for Mill, diversity of opinion is a positive societal good.

Mill’s argument that the dissenting opinion may be true brings up some important points. First, it highlights that Mill believes that moral truths do exist. Thus, in defending liberty, Mill does not say that all opinions are equally valid. Mill is not a relativist; he is not saying that all things can be true according to their circumstances. Rather, he is simply saying that any single idea might be true, and that for this reason no idea can be dismissed, since truth is a boon to progress.

Second, Mill tries to show the contingency of popular beliefs about truth while going to great lengths to not actually state that any popular views about things like religion are wrong. To accomplish this, he observes that in the past people have been persecuted for what is now believed to be true. Thus, Mill creates a logical situation in which anyone reading must accept that if they support persecuting “false” views, then they are required to accept their own persecution if in the minority on a specific issue. Mill is thereby able to dismiss the persecution of “false” views, without condemning modern views as being false. Third, Mill’s examples of persecuted truths reflect some of his rhetorical strategies in this essay. Mill is very conscious of his audience in 19th century England, and he uses examples, like the crucifixion of Christ, which would certainly have resonance with his readers. This reflects a more general strategy in this essay of choosing familiar and often uncontroversial examples in order to make much broader moral claims. In reading this essay it is important to remember that England did not have the same legal protection of liberty that it has today: Mill uses examples to make his points that would not get him into trouble with the law or English society.

Finally, it is worth thinking about the importance of Mill’s assumption in the existence of truth to his justification for freedom of opinion. If no one could be wrong or right would this require tolerance and respect of difference, or could the strongest opinion simply try to defeat all others? Mill does not try to answer this question, because the existence of truth is assumed throughout. However, thinking about such issues is important in seeing how persuasive Mill can be to people who do not share all of his assumptions.

Mill makes the case that if people hold a true opinion they will benefit from hearing dissenters argue against that opinion. He also observes that he thinks most people only know partial truths, and that they might benefit from hearing other fragments of true. This discussion reflects a particular conception of how people learn. Mill contends that people learn through debate, and through having their opinions challenged. Thus, dissenting opinions are socially useful because they help people to understand the real

strength (and limitations) of their own beliefs. Mill believes that the usefulness of dissenting opinions cannot be substituted for, neither when the unpopular view is partially true, nor when it is completely false.

One idea to consider when thinking about Mill's argument is whether he has an overly idealized view of this learning process. For example, what happens when the conflicting opinions rest on fundamentally different presuppositions—are the conversations that Mill describes really possible? If people do not share the same vocabulary for discussing moral and political issues, then will they really be challenging each other or simply talking past each other? Think about what answer Mill might give to this problem. If his answer is unconvincing, then can he still say that a diversity of opinions is socially useful?

Finally, it is also worth looking at Mill's refutation of someone who thinks that Christianity is the whole truth. Mill seems to argue that such a person misinterprets Christianity. Would this response be convincing to a person with views on Christianity that are different from Mill's? Does Mill have other arguments that might provide a better response to this claim? More generally, Mill's discussion of religious toleration in Chapter 2 brings up the issue of whether Mill can be convincing to people whose beliefs demand intolerance of those who disagree with them. Since Mill is using social benefit as the basis of his justification for liberty, it would seem that a person who believes in intolerance could simply say that any benefits of free opinion are outweighed by allowing something evil to be expressed. Think about how persuasive such a critique is, given Mill's claims about the need for dissent in order to truly understand one's own opinions.

### Critically examine chapter 3 “of individuality, as one of the elements of well being” of J.S. Mill's on Liberty ?

In this chapter, Mill tries to show that individuality and nonconformity are valuable both on the level of the individual and on the level of society. Mill believes that society naturally prefers conformity, and that this preference is exacerbated by democratization and the control of society by the masses.

Mill's concern with the stifling of individuality extends to both legal and social realms. He believes that in the face of public pressure to conform and the institutionalized power of aver-reaching laws, the individual is obstructed from an ability to make meaningful choices. and thus from personal development. More broadly, and extremely important to any argument resting on the concept of utility, conformity hurts society as well as the individual in the minority, since inconformity people lose out on potentially

desirable ways of approaching life and stop learning from each other. Mill believes that social progress requires a dynamic give and take between conflicting ways of life.

Mill's views of social progress are intimately tied up with his views on individuality and conformity. Mill subscribes to the belief that there are better and worse ways to live life: barbarians and savages, Mill believes live more poorly than civilized man. But, with civilization comes a tendency toward conformity. And since Mill believes that it is through a free and dynamic development of one's self and the interaction with people with different ways of life that an individual perfects himself, and similarly, that it is through discussion and dissent that "truth" is kept alive in society, conformity leads to social stagnation. There may be such a thing as too much individuality, as a barbarian nation is structured (or unstructured). Conformity, however, the opposite of too much individuality is similarly a problem.

### **Critically analyze the last chapter "applications of J.S Mill's on liberty?"**

This chapter is significant because it provides a much clearer sense of what kinds of actions Mill believes should be respected by society. Most of his examples deal with legal requirements and the role of the state. Why might he have chosen to focus on government action in this chapter? In particular, think about how this approach might work as a rhetorical strategy. It is important to remember, however, that in general Mill does not limit compulsion to state activities. It is likely that in most of his examples he would also say public judgment would be inappropriate.

In general, Mill's applications seem to reinforce the view of liberty of action previously developed. Some examples, however, may be surprising. For example, Mill's statement that gambling houses can be limited reflects an imposition of social values on the business activities of others. Given his argument about the fallibility of social values, Mill's willingness to restrict "bad" businesses might appear inconsistent. In thinking about the significance of such examples, it may be useful to think about two ways of interpreting them. First, such examples might show a depth of Mill's theory that was not previously apparent. Indeed, this is why Mill provides a chapter on applications of his theory. In fact, this example does reinforce the point that while society must not punish behavior, it does not have to actively promote vices. A second interpretation of difficult examples is that Mill himself failed to appreciate the full significance of his theory. It is possible that Mill simply did not see the full logical implications of his previous discussion. When looking at his examples, think about which category Mill falls in to.

Another interesting point is Mill's insistence that parents do not have full ownership over the lives of their children. The good of society requires certain behavior on the part of parents and potential parents, and society is fully justified in compelling that

behavior. In thinking about Mill's argument, consider whether he gives an adequate account of the rights that parents have to raise their children as they see fit.

Finally, Hill ends with a discussion about the importance of people having the freedom to develop their capability to make choices. Mill uses the example of a government that is trying to help people make the right decision through institutionalized means. But this help according to Mill, is no beneficial to either the individual or to society. Mill adheres to his principal that it is only through dissent, only through disagreement and conflict of ideas that society can be bettered and an individual can gain the perspective to help himself. The freedom that Mill wants for the individual is a freedom to make mistakes to assert falsehood. Mill is committed to the idea of progress, his theory of the hierarchy of civilization demonstrates his belief that man can improve himself But Mill sees this progress as only able to emerge from an open culture, one free from conformity: the utility Mill promotes is not one of comfort in the present, it is one designed to create the ultimate good in the future human progress.

### **Write a brief critique on Mill's treatise On Liberty.**

"I do not know whether then or at any other time so short a book ever instantly produced so wide and so important an effect on contemporary thought as did Mill. On Liberty in that day of intellectual and social fermentation (1859).

It was like the effect of Emerson's awakening address to the Phi-Beta-Kappa Society in New England in 1832. The thought of writing it first came into his head in 1855, as he was mounting the steps of Capital at Rome, the spot where thought of the greatest of all literary histories had started into the mind of Giobon just a hundred years before. It was the composition of this book and the influence under which it grew that kept him right. Mill believed that no symmetry no uniformity of custom and convention, but bold, free expression in every field, was demanded by all the needs of human life, and the best instincts of the modern mind. For this reason, among others, he thought Carlyle made a great mistake in presenting, Goethe as the example to the modern world of the lines on which it should shape itself. For this bold, free expansion to which Goethe's ideals were the opposite, these two hundred brief pages, without being in any sense volcanic, are a vigorous, argumentative, searching, noble, and moving appeal. The little volume belongs to the rare books that after hostile criticism has done its best are still found to have somehow suded a cubit to man's stature."

"It was easy to show its inconsistency with language used in the Political Economy to argue that though he had made the case for non-interference more complete he had not established a precise middle axiom in Utilitarianism ; and to press the acknowledged point that it was not original, but came from Germany [Wilhelm Von Humboldt]. These things did not matter in face of appeal the vital fact that like Rousseau it was a moral appeal to tie individual man and woman, and only secondarily to the legislator."

“As literature it will *Areopagitica*, the majestic classic of spiritual and intellectual freedom, with its height and spaciousness, its outbursts of shattering vituperation, in its inflammatory scorn, its boundless power and overflow of passionate speech in all the keys of passion. Mill’s *On Liberty* supplied, however, a real wart of the 19th century : a sustained argument for democracy. “Literary grandeur, however, matters little where the kernel is a restatement and new restatement of Tolerance, a discussion without restriction, the free life of the individual, so long as he does not injure other people, the fair play for social experiment. Of all this nothing could be more bracing than Mill’s handling of his lofty case, and the idealism of it, the enthusiasm sustained as it was for page after page, very nearly approached the electrifying region of the poetic, in the eyes of ardent men and women in our age.”

Mill’s doctrine of Liberty was likely to be misunderstood. “That there were risks of misunderstanding was not unperceived by all—risks, for instance, that people eccentricity to be good for its own sake, or that the fanatic may still be thought useful in his way, Sad is never other than respectable; or that it is wise to ride opinions to death, or that the ultra must always be in the right. There were cases where this misinterpretation carried into practice made dire havoc of life.”

“Macaulay agreed with Mill in thinking a Chinese or Byzantine state would be a terrible - ----- and calamity but quarrelled with him as crying re Noah’s flood Macaulay insisted that there never was such triumph of individuality at then. Inventions were never bolder. So great was the taste for oddity that men with no recommendation but oddity stood high in public estimation. Such was Macaulay’s demurrer. eager acceptance of the book however, was proof enough that he had taken its true measure.”

“*Liberty* was not the work of the Demagogue. rather of Rationalism or anything else, because it was evidently a potent war cry against the infallibility of Public Opinion, and the usurpation of Majorities, whether by Act of Parliament or social boycott.” Even Ruskin; who railed at Mill, felt drawn towards some of the truths in *Liberty* which he found both important and beautifully expressed though not without the rider that “the degree of liberty, you can rightly grant to a number of men is commonly in the inverse ratio of their desire for it.”

Q. 17. In his other writings (for example, *Considerations on Representative Government*), Mill writes in favor of imperialism and despotic rule over “inferior” peoples. How could Mill justify’ this stance, given his commitment to individual liberty? (Look to his first chapter in *On Liberty*, particularly to his discussion of children and barbaric people).

It is important to realize that Mill does not believe freedom to be an inherent right belonging to all men simply because they are human. Mill specifically rejects trying to justify liberty claims in this manner (by things like natural law or divine will). Rather. Mill wants to show that liberty is beneficial to the individual and to society; his book is an attempt to show the utility of individuality. As a result, he sets limits on how far liberty should extend. It would seem natural that Mill’s support of liberty extends to

support self-government, and in general it does. However, he believes that children and “barbarians” lack the necessary tools to enjoy liberty. For these people, it is the state’s job to try to provide them with the civilized ability to enjoy freedom. For children, this results in measures like mandating public education. For barbarians, Mill leaves open the possibility of imperial rule, by which people are ruled with the hope that they can one day rule themselves. Thus, Mill accepts imperialism because he has a hierarchical conception of societies where only some are advanced enough to benefit from the protection of individuality. Mill sees barbarians as inferior peoples in some sense childlike. As a result, the most beneficial way of treating them is as children. Mill thus would accept a kind of benevolent imperialism whose goal was to civilize people to a state where they could benefit from self-government. For those people who were capable of self-government, however, liberty protections would still hold.