

# Review and analysis of john stuart mill's essay on liberty

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One of the most challenging dilemmas for humankind to overcome is the concept of liberty. The boundaries as to the extent of a given person's thoughts, expressions and actions before being halted has been debated for millennia. When it comes to viewpoints and actions, how far is too far? And who declares this extent? How can it be decided that one set of people can define for the rest, the limits of their beliefs and how freely they can express themselves?

Modern political philosopher John Stuart Mill attempts to provide an answer to this challenging question in his essay entitled *On Liberty*. Throughout his disquisition, Mill defends his opinions regarding basic human rights, liberalism and utilitarianism. The following piece will be a thorough amalgamation of Mill's summarized beliefs and intermittent critiques. Although Mill puts forth thought-provoking concepts, certain specificities in his argument were overlooked, and his work lacked full justification, rendering the piece untenable. In the first segment of Mill's monograph he explores the concept of society exerting power over an individual and the history of power itself. Although this concept is far from new he explains its prevalence in the developing world, as humans progress to a more and more civilized state. In previous times, liberty had "meant protection against the tyranny of political rulers".

Specifically, in Ancient Greece, Rome and England, authority was inherited or derived by conquest, and oftentimes used against their own subjects, let alone external enemies. As time advanced, people came to realize that those who possess power in both the political and social realm use it against those

who don't. Mill brings forth the concept of the tyranny of majority, and how social tyranny is oftentimes more intimidating than political oppression, as it "prevents the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways". It is here that he introduces his argument that individuals should have the right of liberty over themselves, regardless if others believe their opinion is "foolish, perverse or wrong". Continuing that coercion by others should only occur when an individual poses a threat to another.

Mill then expresses his stance that the right of liberty should not apply to children, people of certain races, or what he refers to as "backward states of society". He claims these groups should submit to "implicit obedience..." by a ruler "...if they are so fortunate as to find one" until they are capable of exercising their liberty. The exception to his stance is what I believe to be a major flaw in his argument. How is one group able to decide whether or not another group is capable of their basic rights to free thought and actions? To fully comprehend where this strong opinion originates, the reader must acknowledge the fact that Mill was a British male existing in the nineteenth century. During this era, the British Empire was actively occupying and holding sovereignty over the people of India. For years of his own life Mill took on the role of a colonial administrator at the East India Company (EIC), which seized control over a wide-span area of India. He was clearly born into the idea that the people of India belonged to this exception; he believed they were not deserving of their own liberty. Despite India thriving long before Britain, it was much less capitalistic and industrialized. According to himself and the other participants of the EIC, bringing trade to India was an

improvement. In reality, he had justified colonialism and capitalism; invading the Indian subcontinent and using power against them, in order to build a society following Britain's ideals for success.

Because Mill genuinely believed the EIC was aiding in the development of India, rather than tyrannically infringing upon the rights of Indians to their own land, his actions stay true to his thesis. In his perspective, he was indeed helping rather than harming. Later in his piece, Mill touches on the concept of a person's ability to express his opinion. Mill believes any civilized person should always have the ability to express their viewpoints on subject matter freely, and without scolding or retribution. Even if a single man held an opinion the rest disagreed with, mankind would never be justified to silence him. Mill corroborates this by declaring any idea has the potential to be true. If an idea, later found to be true, is silenced because the majority of people believe otherwise, all people "lose ... the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error". He continues that humans are capable of correcting their mistakes through experience and discussion. A truth can only be a truth if it is capable of withstanding criticism and alternate opinions. One of the faults of human nature is the assumption of infallibility regarding commonly accepted truths. If one person is to argue against that opinion, he faces the beratement of others. Mill provides the executions of Jesus Christ and Socrates as examples. In both these renowned cases, the personages were put to death for blasphemy for thoughts too radical for the times in which they belonged. Mill proceeds to express that truth could be justifiably persecuted if unconventional. On the

contrary, he explains how unfortunate and unfair it is that the theorist suffers mistreatment. Even if the truth has been silenced by the suppressors, it typically re-emerges over time. There is no method to fully extinguish a true opinion. However, if a truth is approved by all, it will become what he refers to as “ dead dogma, not a living truth”. Essentially, if nobody argues or fights against a truth, it begins to lose its power. The public will gradually hold such a truth as a prejudice; as a result, the truth will lose validity. In his work, Mill appears to only acknowledge conflicting opinions based on similar rudimentary presumptions. He considers only the disagreement amongst a subset of humankind, rather than humanity as a whole. Radically different civilizations, with varying climates, history and languages will naturally conflict with ideals and standards of beliefs. Conversations regarding these varying opinions are what I deduce to be implausible. Ignoring an obvious language barrier, people of differing belief systems would not be able to sustain a debate, or even make their opinions understood by the other. Both groups may be correct about a concept in their own respects given the scenario in which case it applies. As a general example, if equatorial people and polar people debated over which apparel was most suitable to be worn daily, they would not come to a common conclusion. Rather, two drastically different opinions would be provided, each appropriate for the groups' living situations.

I believe Mill has overlooked this concept of fundamentally varying scenarios, and their impact on the correctness of an opinion. The concept of partial truths is then brought forth into Mill's composition. Rather than a new

truthful idea replacing an old wrong one, the truth typically lies in between them. Oftentimes one idea may be correct in one sense, and another idea correct in another sense; the act of comparing and combining the partial truths leads the beholders towards the most accurate understanding. Thus far Mill has completed his analysis the liberty of free speech. Moving forward he chimes in on a person's ability to act upon their opinions. Similar to his outlook on freedom of speech, he believes people should be able to act as they please, " so long as it is at their own risk and peril". This being said, actions should be more limited than opinions. Mill stresses the importance of freedom of will; he highlights the criticality of making educated and informed decisions, rather than merely following customs. Mill states, " when something ceases to have individuality it ceases to develop further". Forcing conformity upon society prevents people from learning from one another. He speaks of China becoming stationary due to the suppression of individuality, claiming the country can now only be improved by foreigners. Mill worries that Europe is progressing towards the Chinese ideal of making all people alike, weaning out uniqueness. If conformity is only challenged when " life is nearly reduced to one uniform type, all deviations from that type will come to be considered...contrary to nature". Mill's thought here, regarding the threat of enforced assimilation was the longer a group is unaccustomed to see diversity, the less capable mankind is to conceive it.

As a final topic in his disquisition, Mill tackles the challenge to delineate the borders between sovereignty of the individual and authority of society. He believes " to individuality should belong the part of life in which it is chiefly

the individual that is interested; to society, the part in which chiefly interests society". He believes that each should acknowledge a line of conduct towards the other. Mill yet again claims society should have jurisdiction over individuality once a person's demeanour affects the interests of others.

I found this recurrent opinion far too vague to maintain any sense of validity. Mill expresses on numerous occasions that an individual should have a right to their own opinions, speech and actions up until they pose a threat to others. One critical factor he repeatedly fails to convey is the definition of harm itself. Harm can be defined as deliberately inflicting injury, but how is injury then defined? Being damaged? But how then is damaged defined? These synonymous terms are a continuous cycle of ambiguity. For argument's sake, let's take into account a popularly accepted definition, that to harm is to deliberately cause someone to be worse off than they otherwise would have been. This now leads way to controversial topics such as doctor-assisted death. If a critically ill patient requests to put an end to their life via euthanasia, according to the aforementioned definition, a doctor would not be harming the patient by any means; the outcome of the person would in no way be impacted. If this is so, why was euthanasia in Canada not legal until 2016? Certain concepts, such as the term 'harm' are too abstract and contentious to use as a viable argument for or against a point of view. This is a key reason I believe Mill's argument to be insufficiently supported. He spends far too much time referring to his harm principle, without analysing the notion in full.

However, that is not to say I disagree with all components of his thesis. Mill was not wrong when he explores the necessity for innovative and eccentric thoughts in order to advance a society as a whole. If a society infringed upon a community's rights to free thought, speech and action, society would not only be silencing those of radical and extremist opinions, but also preventing the rectification of truth. The truth requires to be challenged, as it is only truly true if it can withstand criticism. I believe Mill is warranted to stresses the critical importance of liberty in regards to its ability to clear perception and liven impressions of truth. In its entirety, Mill's circumlocutory essay had intriguing arguments and opinions, however it seems as though he did not express enough. Considering the essay was lengthy enough to be published as a book, he lacks total justification and insight on the points he is attempting to prove. It is for the lack of support on his thesis - rather than the concepts covered - that I believe his essay is untenable. This is not to discredit Mill's impact on the modern world, as he has influenced and help shape the very nature of present-day democracy. Ultimately, the challenging concept of liberty remains unresolved, as it likely will for time to come.