

John stuart mill essay sample

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Thesis

“ *John Stuart Mill’s* ” autobiography, including the culture he grew up in, the people who influenced or motivated him, the major texts he wrote, the major ideas he reiterated, as well as, the reflection based on what the researcher has learned will conclude whether his major idea or the most famous one will determine whether its relationship to existentialism is negative or positive.

Biography

“ *John Stuart Mill’s* ” mother gave birth to him on May 20, 1806 in London (BBC n. p.). His father, “ *James Mill* ” was a well known philosopher of his time as well (BBC n. p.). His father is close to “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” who is also a philosopher (BBC n. p.). His father and “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” belonged to the group of scholars and the aforementioned were the ones who led what is popularly known as “ *the utilitarian movement* ” (BBC n. p.).

His father played a large role in his life since he was the one who exposed “ *John Stuart Mill* ” to the Greek language when he was only three years old and then Latin language when he just turned eight (BBC n. p.). He studied so early that before he turned eighteen years old, he already completed the following courses: 1) Greek Literature; 2) Philosophy; 3) Chemistry; 4) Botany; 5) Psychology; 6) Economics; 7) History and 8) Law (BBC n. p.).

With the wide range of knowledge that he holds, he was given a chance to serve the “ *East India Company* ” where his father also works (BBC n. p.). He worked at the aforementioned for thirty years wherein he began as a “ *clerk* ” before he was promoted as an “ *assistant examiner* ” eventually became

the chief of the examiner's office (BBC n. p.). While he was serving at the “*East India Company*”, he wrote some of his important works (BBC n. p.). He could have stayed there longer if only the “*East India Company*” was not dissolved (BBC n. p.).

When the company was dissolved, “*John Stuart Mill*” decided to run for a seat at the “*British House of Commons*” (BBC n. p.). He was given a chance to serve for three years since he won however he lost during his “reelection bid” (BBC n. p.).

When he could not serve the “*British House of Commons*” anymore, he went to France and spent his final years writing more significant works (BBC n. p.). He then died on the 8th of May 1873 (BBC n. p.).

Historical / Cultural Background

“*John Stuart Mill*” has been surrounded with brilliant people who are at the same time social reformers (BBC n. p.). His father was close to “*Jeremy Bentham*”, a philosopher who believed and advocated “*utilitarian philosophy*” (BBC n. p.).

Furthermore, he was extensively trained and educated by his parents (BBC n. p.). This also paved the way for the development of his gift for poetry, for writing of his “*own philosophical views*” (BBC n. p.).

Moreover, he married “*Harriet Taylor*” who also played a large role in his works particularly on topics which are highly related to “*women's rights*”

(BBC n. p.). In fact, she co-wrote one of “ *John Stuart Mill’s* ” work entitled, “ *On Liberty* ” (BBC n. p.).

Influences

There were several people who inspired “ *John Stuart Mill* ” and some of these were the following:

He showed great respect and support for issues including the following: “ 1) *equality for women*; 2) *compulsory education*; 3) *birth control*; and 4) *land reform in Ireland* ” (BBC n. p.). He advocated the following “ 1) *equality for women*; 2) *compulsory education*; 3) *birth control* ” because his wife was already an advocate even before they met and he was inspired by his wife (BBC n. p.).

He believed in the “ *utilitarian philosophy* ” because his father and “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” were advocates of the aforementioned (BBC n. p.).

Major Texts

“ *John Stuart Mill’s* ” major works are the following: 1) “ *Principles of Political Economy* ” which he wrote in 1834; 2) “ *On Liberty* ” which he published in 1859; 3) “ *Utilitarianism* ” which he finished in 1863; 4) “ *On the Subjection of Women* ” which he did in 1869; 4) “ *Autobiography* ” which he finished in 1873; 5) “ *Three Essays on Religion* ” which he finished writing in 1874; and last but not least 6) “ *Considerations on Representative Government* ” which he published in 1861 (Bennagen 158 – 159).

Generally, “ *John Stuart Mill’s* ” major works concentrate on “ *liberty, reason, and science* ” as well as, “ *the 19th Century movement which focused on empiricism and collectivism* ” (Bennagen 158 – 159).

Major Ideas

The following are “ *John Stuart Mill’s* ” major ideas:

First of all, he said that “ *actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness* ” (Bennagen 158 – 163). For him happiness occurs if there is pleasure and if pain is not felt (Bennagen 158 – 163). “ *Utilitarianism* ” then for him is “ *the doctrine that says what is useful is good, and consequently, the ethical value of conduct is determined by the utility of its results; the utilitarianism tradition sees that the supreme objective of moral action is to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number* ” (Bennagen 158 – 163).

Second, “ *John Stuart Mill* ” introduces the following concepts: “ *1) individual liberty; 2) political obligation; 3) mass society; and 4) political equality* ”

(Bennagen 163 – 166). According to him, there are three kinds of liberties: the first one is technically referred to as “ *the absolute liberty of thought, conscience, and speech* ”; the second is known as the “ *liberty of tastes and pursuits* ”; and the third is known as the “ *freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others* ” (Bennagen 163 – 166). These are extremely significant to him and it is clearly evident when he said that, “ *no society in which liberties are not, on the whole, respected, is free, whatever may be its form of government; and none is completely free in which they do not exist* ”

absolute and unqualified " (Bennagen 163 - 166). He reiterates that whatever form of government is adapted by the society, it is important that one's respect for another is preserved and all the kinds of liberties aforementioned should then be observed as well (Bennagen 163 - 166).

With regards to " *the absolute liberty of thought, conscience, and speech* ", he said that " *to suppress an opinion is wrong, whether or not that opinion is true* " (Bennagen 163 - 166). He said that every opinion should be articulated whether it fights against an issue or a person or whether it tries to fight for it (Bennagen 163 - 166). This is truly important to him because he said that, if it is not expressed and it is true then we will never be made aware of the truth and if it not express and it is wrong then we will never be able to fully understand the truth behind it since truth may emerge from " *its conflict with error* " (Bennagen 163 - 166). It is then very important not to prevent anyone from stating his or her opinion since by doing so, " *we may be silencing a true opinion* " (Bennagen 163 - 166).

Or it is also possible that if one is prevented in airing his or her opinion and " *the opinion is partly true* " then there is a chance that the whole truth may be prevented in its emergence as well (Bennagen 163 - 166). As " *John Stuart Mill* " puts it, " *it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied* " (Bennagen 163 - 166). Besides, it is only through liberated and unrestricted deliberations, even of accurate estimations put off such judgments from becoming " *dogma, prejudice, formula* " (Bennagen 163 - 166). Interestingly, there is only one exception to the rule set with regards to the " *expression of opinion* ", he said that if an opinion harms other individuals already then it has to be <https://assignbuster.com/john-stuart-mill-essay-sample/>

suppressed (Bennagen 163 - 166). It is rather motivating to note that if he believes in freedom of speech this way then one may be guaranteed that if there are two cases that he needs to weigh, he would surely make decisions based on “ *the greatest possible freedom of expression* ” (Bennagen 163 - 166).

Another excellent point that he made is that autonomy is a crucial precondition of “ *human moral and intellectual development* ” (Bennagen 163 - 166). He said that creativity and critical thinking is upheld when one is free to articulate what he or she is thinking (Bennagen 163 - 166). One’s personality is not complete then if there is no liberty since this plays a large role in the development of “ *individual faculties* ” (Bennagen 163 - 166).

The third is his work entitled, “ *Autobiography* ” wherein he shared how he acquired extensive training and education (Bennagen 163 - 166). He was obliged to read Greek and Latin readings at a very young age that such strictly-controlled studying taught him “ *a certain habit of work that was not broken by any form of idleness* ” (Bennagen 163 - 166). The major ideas in this work of his include the following:

1. The youth should be motivated to study or to complete their education (Bennagen 163 - 166). He suggests that “ *compulsory education* ” should be pushed by the State until the parents themselves are already capable of obliging their children to be educated (Bennagen 163 - 166).
2. The first one even addresses the issue of salary of teachers, as well as, how the poor may avail of education as well (Bennagen 163 - 166). He

said that if the State enforces it, examinations will be taken by the students and if the student does not pass, his or her father should be penalized and obliged to pay a fine, “ *to be worked out, if necessary, by his labor, and the child might be put to school at his expense* ” (Bennagen 163 - 166). He believes this would work since the parent will most likely do everything in order for the child to pass the examination given so as to avoid

penalties or fines (Bennagen 163 - 166).

The fourth major idea that he taught us is with regards to the “ *proper functions of government* ” (Bennagen 168 - 172). According to his work entitled, “ *Considerations and Representative Government* ”, it is stipulated that “ these are not permanent across societies and they tend to be more all-embracing or comprehensive in a less developed than a developed society ” and that “ we cannot settle on the temperament of a government if we limit ourselves to the rightful sphere of legislative functions ” (Bennagen 168 - 172).

The fifth is that he believes that the government should only intervene whenever it is highly necessary (Bennagen 168 - 172). The government should carry out things which ordinary individuals cannot do; they should prevent people from experiencing force and fraud unless they can depend on self-help (Bennagen 168 - 172). The government should also intervene when it comes to “ *enforcement of contracts* ” (Bennagen 168 - 172). In addition to that, “ *they are assigned certain tasks for which no reason can be assigned except the simple reason that they lead to general convenience* ” for

instance, “ minting of money, building of roads and bridges, making of maps, as setting of a standard of weights and measures” (Bennagen 168 - 172).

Sixth, he said that government regulation is needed in “ *education, child labor, monopolies, colonization schemes* ” (Bennagen 168 - 172). If the government does not take of these, no one will and so at the end of the day, there is no other choice for the government but to take charge (Bennagen 168 - 172). In short, since the stipulation of these services is to the interest of the people, the government will carry out the function of “ *service provider* ” (Bennagen 168 - 172).

Seventh, he also provides a list of the characteristics of a “ good government” (Bennagen 168 - 172). He said that the best government is the one which is contributing to advancement / progress /development (Bennagen 168 - 172). He said that progress is synonymous to: 1) improvement; 2) order; and 3) permanence (Bennagen 168 - 172). By “ order” he meant, compliance to the administration, conservation of peace, as well as, safeguarding of “ *all kinds and amounts of good that exist in society* ” (Bennagen 168 - 172). For him, a “ *representative form of government is the best* ” because of the following grounds:

- the civil liberties and wellbeing of the populace are sheltered only when they are able to eloquently express and work for these interests and to put into effect such rights (since in a popular or representative government the aforementioned setup is possible) (Bennagen 168 - 172).

- the general affluence accomplishes a superior stature and is more broadly diffused, in proportion to the amount and assortment of the personal energies enlisted in promoting it (Bennagen 168 - 172).

What “ *John Stuart Mill* ” tries to stress here is that individuals who belong to a certain society or government should have direct involvement in the affairs of the government for it to really be categorized as the best form of government (Bennagen 168 - 172).

Last but not least, eighth of his major ideas concerns the economy; he wrote these ideas in his book entitled, “ *Principles of Political Economy* ” which is composed of five books namely: “ 1) *Production*; 2) *Distribution*; 3) *Exchange*; 4) *Influence of the Progress of Society on Production and Distribution*; 5) *Of the Influence of Government* ” (Bennagen 172 - 174). In the first book, he reiterates that in order for a production to be successful, there has to be land, labor, and capital (Bennagen 172 - 174). He also said that something is considered a wealth if and only if it is useful and if it may be exchanged for something else (Bennagen 172 - 174). Also, he said that wealth are only those referred to as “ material things ” because these are the only things that may be accrued (Bennagen 172 - 174). Furthermore, in the second book, it is said that “ *production and distribution are interrelated* ” (Bennagen 172 - 174). Moreover, in the third book, he said that the value of a good by its purchasing power to purchase other goods

Detailed Analysis of Specific Idea for which Philosopher is Known

The philosopher is best known for his ideas with regards to “ *utilitarianism* ” (Bennagen 158 - 177). He was greatly influenced by his father’s friend

named “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” and so this is where “ *John Stuart Mill* ” got his idea from (Bennagen 158 - 177). According to “ *Jeremy Bentham* ”, the ethical theory he established which is popularly known as “ *ethical or moral universalism* ” is actually based upon the terminology “ *utility* ” (Bennagen 158 - 177). “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” emphatically defines it as “ *that property in any object, whereby it tends to produce benefit, advantage, pleasure, good, or happiness or to prevent the happening of mischief, pain, evil, or unhappiness to the party whose interest is considered* ” (Bennagen 158 - 177). In turn, the aforementioned principle of “ *universalism* ” is understood fully by “ *looking into the following hypotheses/assertions/principles* ”:

- “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” emphasizes that the following terminologies: “ a) *pleasure*; b) *happiness*; c) *goodness*; d) *benefit*; e) *advantage*; 5) *etcetera* ” are actually of identical values (Germino 235 - 236);
- “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” reiterates that the following terminologies: “ a) *pleasure*; b) *happiness*; c) *goodness*; d) *benefit*; e) *advantage*; 5) *etcetera* ” are actually determined, thus, quantifiable and unquestionable as well (Germino 235 - 236);
- “ *Jeremy Bentham* ” disagrees that a person’s action, as well as, the moves of the government must be “ *founded or rooted*” upon the “ *imperative which actually takes complete advantage of gratification and dwindles pain* ” (Germino 235 - 236); and that
- Last but not least, “ *it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong of human action in every situation, and in particular when governmental action is called for* ” (Germino 235 - 236).

" *John Stuart Mill* " may have based his ideas on " *utilitarianism* " however he believes

that " *utilitarianism* " is where " *morals/ethics/good deeds are based/founded/instituted upon* " (Ebenstein & Ebenstein 580). In short, he is not very much focused on " *the greatest happiness of the greatest number* " but on the *greatest happiness alone* " (Germino 240). Explaining further, " *utility* " is still comparable to " *pleasure* " however this time, there is already an " *acknowledgment that there are various kinds because of excellence and greatness* " (Germino 240).

Explanation of Terms for which Philosopher is Known

The perfect explanation for the aforementioned is that, " *deeds are only correct or proper if and only if the at the end of it happiness is achieved/felt and wrong or improper if and only if at the closing stage of the deed wretchedness is reached* " (Ebenstein & Ebenstein 580). Happiness then is synonymous to the absence of its antonym while " *wretchedness is when pain occurs after a certain deed is carried out* " (Germino 240).

Aspects which were Difficult to Understand / Questions I Would Pose

The aspects that were a little difficult to understand or to answer would be the following:

- Why did " *John Stuart Mill* " say that " *it is natural for men to impose their views on others which tends to result in intolerance and dissent* " (Bennagen 164)? Is this his subjective view of human nature

(Bennagen 164)? Does he think that his advocacy with regards to liberty then is not actually realizable (Bennagen 164)?

- Would John Stuart Mill's system with regards to education be feasible and practicable in third world or underdeveloped countries (Bennagen 164)?

How John Stuart Mill has Influenced Subsequent Thinkers (Course of History)

Subsequent thinkers including " Henry Sidgwick and Peter Singer " were greatly influenced by " John Stuart Mill " (Utilitarian Philosophers n. p.). The first thinker utilized " *utilitarianism* " to seek for a basis where morality may be detached or separated from religion (Mautner n. p.). Meanwhile the last also writes works based on utilitarianism (Best n. p.).

Relationship to Existentialism (Positive or Negative)

Since existentialism is focused on " *individuality, freedom, and choice* ", " John Stuart Mill " may not qualify as an existentialist even if the best of his works if not the best is centered on freedom or liberty; this is evidently clear in his work entitled, " *On Liberty* " (Bennagen 158 - 177). He is for the " *greatest good for the greatest number* " and not for personal individuality, freedom, as well as, choice (Bennagen 158 - 177).

Evaluation of Philosopher in Relation to My Life and the World Today

This philosopher has motivated me to critically think about the situations I am in before I make my final decision; I always keep in mind that " *actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness* " (Bennagen 158 - 163). I utilize

the aforementioned to eventually avoid hurting people (Bennagen 158 - 163).

Interestingly, this philosopher also taught me to speak my mind; I do not allow myself to be afraid. I am always inspired by " *John Stuart Mill's* " statement wherein he said that " *to suppress an opinion is wrong, whether or not that opinion is true* " (Bennagen 163 - 166). This " somehow " makes me feel that I am an advocate of " *e xistentialist philosophy* " since by doing so I feel that I am entirely free and thus accountable for what I did or said (Bennagen 163 - 166).

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