

John Stuart Mill "On Liberty" Critique Assignment

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He takes issue with the illegitimate power society has over the individual. He worries that this “ social tyranny” hinders the self-cultivation of the individual. Although he fears that the despotism of custom will lead to the stagnation of society, his solution to this problem ironically requires that we adopt his concern for well being of others as custom. The main theme throughout, *On Liberty*, is the idea that without a strong will to actively cultivate vital individuality, a society will cease to progress. ¹ The overall well being of a nation-state lies within the citizens’ willingness to promote individuality.

Promotion of individuality increases a person’s worth making him a more valuable member of society; so, the more valuable a member of society he becomes, the more likely he is to make positive contributions to the nation-state. Dissenters are an example of those individuals who actively cultivate vital individuality. ¹ Mill, John Stuart, and Stefan Collini. *On Liberty and other writings* Cambridge [England: Cambridge UP, 1989. Print.]. p. 63 (“ It is not by... ’) Asking questions, proposing contrasts, providing half-truths, and testing currently accepted ideas are all methods by which dissenters contribute to the advancement of society.

Mill suggests that closed-minded individuals who reject the unlike beliefs of others will never truly know their views to be the whole truth. ³ Dissenters offer a way for the popular beliefs of society to be put to test. The examination of popularly held beliefs will confirm existing truths while unearthing fallacies and new truths. ⁴ Society as a whole will significantly benefit from the individuality displayed by dissenters. Mill believes diversity is key to personal and societal development. An individual’s ability to

evaluate himself in contrast with others promotes progress in the life of that individual.

Society benefits from diversity because individuals will see potential to combine their positive differences for the benefit of the community.

Conformity to the norms of society hinders individuals' opportunity for learning from one another. Mill maintains that every generation must self-cultivate in its own unique approach in order to guarantee its beliefs continue to be meaningful and relevant. 5 To do so, every individual in every generation must be open to " human experiments of living. " According to Mill, diversity, as well as experiments of living, are integral parts of individual and social progression.

Mill provides detailed instructions on how to cultivate the vital individuality that leads to societal growth. On a personal level, he believes it is important to actively strive to be an individual in all facets of life. He requests that every individual interpret human experience without being tainted by the narrow views of custom, religion, and popular norms. 2 *ibid.* p. 21 (" To refuse a hearing... ") 3 *ibid.* p. 23 (" Not certainly to the... ") 4 *ibid.* p. 47 (" Popular opinions, on subjects... ") 5 *ibid.* p. 23 (" Complete liberty of contradicting... ") On a societal level, Mill proposes that only actions that will harm others should be restricted. This " harm principle" prohibits the creation of laws that inhibit an individual's right to act as he wishes, as long as no other individual is harmed by his actions. 6 For individuals, Mill's " harm principle" requests the creation of an open-minded community in which citizens must feel comfortable to act on their feelings without fear of social humiliation or legal penalty. 7 He accepts that individual's natural

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reactions will occur; but he maintains his point that, despite the reaction, no one should be treated with anger or resentment.

He fears that society's intervention in the life of an individual is ill advised and unnecessary if he is not harming anyone else. Society can afford to bear the inconvenience of any action that indirectly affects individuals, but does not violate any fixed obligations. Mill acknowledges that, although his instructions are thorough, they do not come free of obstacles posed by society. The principal obstacles presented to the cultivation of vital individuality, along with the progression of society, derive from social tyranny. Mill recognizes that tyranny of the few over the many is a theme of the past, now mostly overcome by revolts.

He is far more concerned with the resulting tyranny of the majority over the minority. This form of tyranny is extremely detrimental to the cultivation of vital individuality. Tyranny of the majority over the minority denies individual freedom to any individual who stands with less than fifty percent of the electorate. The sentiments, ideals, and morals of the greater number of people governing the political process are imposed upon the minority. 6 *ibid.* p. 13 (" That the only purpose... ") 7 *ibid.* p. 14 (" The only freedom which... ") The problem with such tyranny lies in the fact that the minority will be silenced. Without the dissenting opinions of the minority, the society, as a whole, will lose progress. The domination by the majority over society creates a fear of being different amongst individuals. The majority implements a "one size fits all" idea that their beliefs should be good enough for all individuals. Another obstacle is the tyrannical influence of custom and tradition over individuals. Customs are the obligatory rules on behavior and <https://assignbuster.com/john-stuart-mill-on-liberty-critique-assignment/>

principle that are held by the vast majority in a society. Mill's issue with custom is the hindrance it poses to the cultivation of individuality by narrowing an individual's view of human experience. Customs suppress an individual's desire to differentiate himself from the confining limitations of society. Individuals who blindly accept custom as a way of living will develop preconceived notions about life. 10 Fear of breaking custom or tradition and being ostracized by family and friends will prevent an individual from trying new things that have yet to be tried. Although custom and tradition are not enforced by any political power, individual's fear of being shamed, ignored, and rejected is enough to make custom similar to law in society.

Custom and tradition create such a sense of unyielding normalcy that any individual who rebels will face serious social consequences; therefore, custom and tradition are a severe obstruction of social progress. I do find many convincing, pertinent points in Mill's essay, but it appears he does not fully address the irony within his argument. His issue with set beliefs forced onto individuals by the majority of society is essentially what he is proposing to do, but with his own beliefs. 8 *ibid.* p. 20 (" If all mankind minus... ") 9 *ibid.* p. 58 (' The traditions and customs... ') 10 *ibid.* p. 58 (" Secondly, their interpretation The cultivation of vital individuality Mill advocates for is an idea and way of living, similar to a custom or tradition, and it must be forced upon individuals from the time of childhood. Asking individuals to make choices, ask questions, and interpret human experience is similar to custom in the way that it asks individuals to live their lives to a certain standard and fulfill certain obligations.

Even Mill's "harm principle" requests the individual to practice great restraint. According to the "harm principle," individuals must: refrain from harming others, refrain from making judgments, strive to respect others right, and be accepting. Those rules, although rather sneakily, completely contradict Mill's entire argument against confinement in society and stifling of individuality. If he truly wanted every individual to maintain a free, unrestrained life style, he would not have written his essay, *On Liberty*.

Had Mill explained that he disagrees with the customs and traditions currently practiced in society, but that he would like to propose new custom and tradition of his own ideology, his whole argument would gain validity. The irony within Mill's argument is clear. In order to cultivate vital individuality, an individual must first accept a certain way of living as custom. Despite this paradox, Mill's issue with the majority ruling over the minority remains valid. In fact, most of Mill's arguments are exceptionally relevant.