

The benefits and limitations of liberty in j.s. mill's on liberty



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In John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*, Mill states that individual liberty may be limited by only one thing: the self-preservation of society and other individuals. To that end, man must retain the liberty to act and think as he so chooses, without the suppression of ideas or opinions, as long as it does not harm others. Mill states, "The sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their members, is self-protection...[his] own good, physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant." (p. 14) Mill justifies this theory as a solution to two types of tyranny: tyranny of the majority, in which the many persecute the few, and tyranny of public opinion, in which society seeks to impose a set of values on everyone. Although Mill allows all actions that do not directly harm others, he thoroughly supports laws that penalize inaction where action would prevent harm to another. In his utilitarian theory, he argues that the usefulness of liberty is warranted by its benefit for mankind: "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (p. 15) For Mill, liberty—based on a recognition of man's fallibility and right to self-preservation—breeds individuality, which in turn leads to the betterment of individual character and of society as a whole. Mill defends his belief that all opinions must be heard by stating that individuals cannot limit the expression of opinions simply because it is bad for society and for themselves. The support for this is provided with the axiom of human fallibility. Because man is fallible, a silenced opinion, however outrageous, may in fact be true, or at the very least contain slight elements of truth, as the closest form to perfection usually lies between popular opinion and the dissent. Mill states, "We can never be sure that the opinion we are

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endeavoring to stifle is a false opinion.” (p. 22) To support this claim, Mill invokes Socrates as proof that people can misjudge even the most competent and well-intentioned minds. Mill states any contemporary of Socrates would have been within the norm to be shocked by his custom-shattering theology, but as we now know, his contributions to philosophy are colossal. Thus, the only method of correction is discussion and experience. Furthermore, truth must be tested and challenged in order to prevent it from losing its meaning. “ If [an opinion] is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not living truth.” (p. 40) Thus, if a opinion is not challenged, although people may still follow its claims, people will generally forget its fundamental purposes and thus will not know how to defend it. Mill warns against this because when truth loses its power, it can no longer be used as a gauge for morality because it does not affirm and demonstrate that it is in fact righteous. Mill concludes that even if an opinion is entirely false, it is beneficial in that it has proved the opposing opinion to be the truth. Next, Mill addresses whether people should be able to act on their individual opinions. Although Mill has firmly established that society is not to intervene on opinions that do not harm members of the community, he does not specifically feel the same about actions. Mill believes that if one’s opinions cause action that harm others, the individual’s liberty to such an opinion may be suspended. Mill states, “ The liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people.” (p. 62) Mill continues this argument to say that if the individual merely acts in matters that regard he and only he, that “ he should be allowed, without molestation, to carry his opinions into practice at his own cost.” (p. 62)

Because Mill has established the axiom of human fallibility, different “
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experiments of living” are necessary and justified. (p. 63) These “experiments” are essentially perspectives on life. Since no individual ever lives a completely correct life, there must exist according to Mill many perspectives that while each flawed are all equally close (or far) from the truth. Mill addresses how the tyranny of the majority can influence behavior and limit individuality and spontaneity, limiting an individual’s actions. Dissenting methods of life are perceived by the majority as worthless, simply because the majority cannot assess how an opposing viewpoint can potentially be more beneficial than the current popular method the majority is content with. Mill states, The majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they are now (for it is they who make them what they are), cannot comprehend why those ways should not be good enough for everyone... [spontaneity] is rather looked on with jealousy, as a troublesome and perhaps rebellious obstruction. (p. 63)The majority will always be content with the current popular opinion because if they are not, the popular opinion simply shifts to the majority’s method of life. Furthermore, Mill addresses how freedom of action can be beneficial to society. Within the realm of choice, Mill advocates against conforming to laws merely because they are laws, because it does not lead to the development of the individual. Mill claims that the human traits of “ perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even more preference, are exercised only in making a choice...He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation.” (p. 65) Mill further advocates individuality by linking nonconformist ideology to social progress and economic development. By arguing that conformity limits the individual’s liberty of choice, Mill is able to <https://assignbuster.com/the-benefits-and-limitations-of-liberty-in-js-mills-on-liberty/>

claim conformity erodes human capacities (perception, judgment, etc). Thus, as these capacities wither away, humans become “incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings.” (p. 68) This removal of radical thought limits human development and inevitably, social development. Simplified, individuality, in the form of different life “experiments,” is essential for social progress in society and in an individual. And analogous to his discussion of the liberties of opinion and thought, individuality is valuable because people may be able to learn something from the other people they see around them acting differently. Mill’s arguments in *On Liberty* are convincing, but not airtight at first glance. He extends his notion of liberty—interfering only for self-protection—to the strong majority of mankind, but stops short of extending it to children or undeveloped countries. The exception made for children is understandable; parental rights have always extended beyond those of the state, because children have not yet reached a point where they can make educated and informed decisions about their lives. After they have been sufficiently educated and have acquired the ability to question and discuss, they are given their full rights to do anything as long as it doesn’t harm others, even if it is to hurt themselves. Mill’s extension of this exception to underdeveloped nations, however, is problematic. Mill’s logic toward underdeveloped nations classifies their peoples as similar to children, in that they have not yet acquired the ability to sufficiently debate their own opinions and actions. Mill asks, If gambling, or drunkenness, or incontinence, or idleness, or uncleanness, are as injurious to happiness, and as a great hindrance to improvement... why (it may be asked) should not law, so far as is consistent with practicability and social convenience, endeavor to repress these also?

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(p. 89) Although these actions may in fact be detrimental to social development, these nations are still beset with adults who, by Mill's own theory, are capable of making their own judgment on their own personal methods of life. Shouldn't an individual's choice not to exercise his or her choice be protected as long as it doesn't harm others? And should other citizens be punished for their nation's immaturity? According to Mill, this is unjust. Mill sums up the main points of *On Liberty* in one swift blow: That mankind are not infallible; that their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths; that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognizing all sides of the truth, are principles applicable to men's modes of action, not less than their opinions. (p. 63) He argues that liberty and individuality are not only related, but are inseparable. Mill's reasoning stems from the utilitarian view that because man is not perfect, no opinion or life should be taken as the whole truth or as entirely false unless given an opportunity to be debated, and such a process is the only means of progression. Mill remarks that society is currently being dominated by an emerging conformity and mediocrity. He sees individuality as the only hope to curb this dangerous progression, and liberty as individuality's creator and protector.