

Liberal Read

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Mill On Individualism, Originality, and Progress

BOOK REVIEW

John S. Mill

*On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other
Essays*

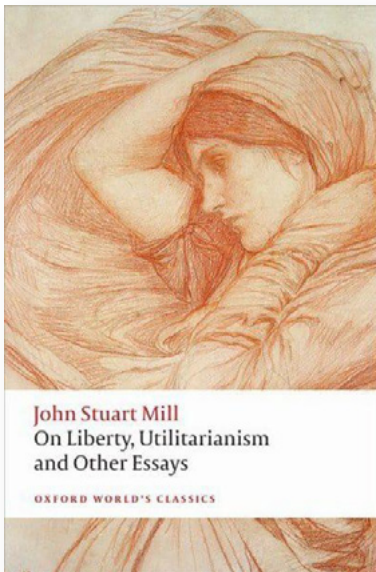
Oxford University Press, 2015

By Nayeli Riano

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Mill On Individualism, Originality, and Progress



Introduction

How does one introduce a classic? The renown of a work such as *On Liberty* leaves plenty of room for commentary from everyone familiar with John Stuart Mill, a fact that is itself indicative of the sheer popularity of this relatively short work and Mill's intellectual impact. English philosopher Maurice Cranston wrote of Mill that he "held the attention of the reading public of the Western world longer than any other 19th-century philosopher, with the notable exception of Karl Marx".¹ Perhaps it is not by coincidence that these two spots are held by such contrasting thinkers. Like any classic thinker, Mill's work needs to be revisited and revitalised every so often to prevent his important thoughts from being reduced to simple platitudes about liberty.

Originally completed in 1857 but first published in 1859, *On Liberty* has been the subject of myriad studies as an iconic work of political philosophy. It is representative of a classical liberalism that upholds individual liberty to the highest degree, not out of desire for radical individualism but rather for the improvement of society at large through the cultivation of individuality and originality. Indeed, Mill is known as a defender of liberty. That said, as with any thinker whose thought reaches the heights of immortality, there is much more to Mill than his love of liberty.

Mill's philosophical thought

Mill was a man of many interests. Apart from his views on liberty, he is also known to readers for his utilitarian philosophy, being the son of utilitarian philosopher James Mill, who educated his son at home with an intensive curriculum. His father was certainly a strong influence, but Mill was also a student of Jeremy Bentham. Yet utilitarianism was not his only influence. Mill took interest in other philosophical frameworks, such as English and German romanticism, French positivism (scientism), and German historicism—all of which are palpable throughout *On Liberty*. Then there was his colleague and companion Harriet Taylor, whom Mill not only praises in the dedication to *On Liberty* but also inspired him to pen his famous essay *On the Subjection of Women* in 1869, with many of her own thoughts incorporated into the text.

1 Cranston, "John Stuart Mill and Liberty," 82.

Apart from Mill's intellectual influences, moreover, we can also consider key historic moments that likely shaped Mill in his formative years. He grew up in Britain when the country was still recovering from its wars with Napoleonic France and confronting "rising popular discontent against an exclusive and elitist political system and an emerging industrial system in which men's and women's lives appeared dramatically exposed to the uncertainties of trade and manufacturers".² These two events indicate that Britain during Mill's time was undergoing a period of change, and Mill viewed himself as living through a transition from a "highly unequal society" to "a more egalitarian order".³ As with any crucial moment in history, such as a nation's recovery from war or the growth of an industrial society—resulting from an unprecedented technological event—people's responses were varied and contrasting with regards to the proper course of action that would respond to these two events.

In Mill's writings, we see a transition of liberalism towards a social movement in which liberty becomes a broader social principle.

One element that Mill brings out clearly in his writings, however, is the need to understand the distinction between purported "correct" or "right" solutions to social problems and their historic tendency to become sources of coercion. In other words, Mill reminds us that there is a fine line between taking our belief in the

social good and turning it into the very restrictive force that prevents our fellow citizens from forming their own thoughts and pursuing their own ends. This problem is what Mill sets out to prevent in *On Liberty*.

The above description of *On Liberty* may sound like an echo of a similar argument from the 17th century. Indeed, Mill wrote during the period of Victorian England; this was a relatively free society in the sense that the state did not interfere nearly as much as it had two centuries earlier, or even one century before, when Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote *The Limits of State Action*, which Mill cites in the epigraph to *On Liberty*. Mill's society was not the same as Locke's or Humboldt's. As Cranston put it, "Mill's Victorian contemporaries were seldom oppressed by government, which was minimal... But nearly all individuals were constantly pressured by neighbors, employers, husbands, and fathers, who were dominated in turn by taboos and conventions governing a host of matters—courtship, dress, recreation, use of the Sabbath, and much else."⁴

From Cranston's observation, we may conclude that *On Liberty* is not a response to government as much as it is a response to society and the ways in which society unconsciously adopts moral frameworks that constrain the liberty of others. In Mill's writings, then, we see a transition in the history of liberalism from a political philosophy aimed primarily, even solely, at government intervention in the lives of citizens to a social movement in which liberty becomes a broader social principle that is the responsibility of individuals to uphold and preserve against each other. Although Mill is certainly interested in responding to government intervention and allocates some space in *On*

² Mill et al., *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, ix.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

Liberty to discuss this topic, the work is primarily a philosophical discourse about the effects and problems of resolute social propriety on liberty and individuality.

For Mill, the social context of liberty matters more than its political and philosophical contexts. In the very introduction to his work, he tells us he is not interested in discussing liberty as a philosophical question about the freedom of will as opposed to determinism, which holds that every human action is restrained and predetermined. Nor is he interested in discussing the relationship between personal liberty and governmental authority. The former question was a popular philosophical and theological argument in the 17th century, famously taken up by Thomas Hobbes and Anglican bishop John Bramhall, for example. The latter was also a common topic in political philosophy when debating the proper political order. Neither, however, answers the question that concerns Mill most. Mill's focus on the social context of liberty incorporates both philosophical and political understandings of liberty because analysing the social context of liberty requires both philosophy and politics: understanding the ways in which society may work against the individual requires a level of introspection about the ways we understand our own liberty as well as extrospection about the ways in which others, even political rulers, shape and limit our liberty.

We must remember, after all, that Mill was living in a comparatively more democratic society, where economic and social equality was spreading widely, than in previous years. Not only was society more democratic, but the political organisation in Mill's time was characterised by nations and rulers who had concern for their citizens.⁵ As a result, what the editors to this edition call "social opinion" became the new form of domination that proved pernicious for the flourishing of a liberal society. Mill implies that, in this new democratic society, culture shapes politics such that whatever a given society deems culturally acceptable is likely to become the political status quo. To prevent this form of social domination from oppressing individuals, Mill attempts to establish the principles that will preserve individual liberty against social pressure in *On Liberty*.

"On Liberty": A glimpse inside

Mill's work opens with a discussion of that perennial tension between liberty and authority. This problem, Mill argues, is a historical feature that has burdened ancient and modern societies alike. But Mill marks a difference between past and present: in old times, he tells us, "this contest was between subjects, or some classes of subjects, and the Government".⁶ He continues: "[b]y liberty, was meant protection against the tyranny of the political rulers. Rulers are viewed as antagonistic to the people because of the place or entity from where they derived their power and authority".⁷ Notice the past tense. That form of liberty as protection against political rulers is no longer the type of liberty that is in most need of protection. With tyrannical rulers gone, a new threat to liberty emerges in the form of social convention. For this reason, Mill tells us that he defines liberty in a civil and social sense, which he describes as "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual".⁸ From this definition, Mill is able to assert the central principle of his work:

5 Mill et al., *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays*, 6.

6 Ibid., 5.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. The only purpose for such power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.⁹

This affirmation is now known as the “harm principle”, which sustains that intervention is only permissible when it prevents harm. Mill identifies one sole reason to justify interference with individual liberty—the harm principle—which is to avoid harm to others. Moreover, Mill immediately adds an additional warning to readers: man’s “own good”, however we define it, cannot be considered a satisfactory reason to interfere with anyone’s personal liberty. This second statement bears the more problematic questions that Mill treats throughout the rest of his work. What are the implications of a social and political system in which man’s “good” does not justify intervention? Is this statement a critique of paternalism of all sorts?

Now, Mill does not go so far as to say intervention is never justified. In fact, he provides certain qualifications to his harm principle. Two exceptions are people whose faculties have not yet matured, such as children, and societies where people are not yet “capable of being improved by free and equal discussion”.¹⁰ Recall Mill’s own upbringing: He had a very didactic education with his father, and his self-development was certainly a result of his father’s intervention in his education. As a result, Mill does agree that society and parents can interfere in the lives of children, since they are not yet fully developed. The same goes for societies where liberty is not yet an established and cherished value. Mill adopts a progressive view of history, meaning that he believes that societies need to develop in stages before reaching certain standards of civilisation that establish and preserve liberty as a keystone principle.

Apart from these exceptions, however, individual liberty must be upheld. Mill identifies three cases in which liberty is especially vital. The first is what might be called one’s inner or personal domain of consciousness. This domain includes our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs—freedom of conscience. The second regards our plans for our lives, which involves our personal preferences, values, and desires—freedom to pursue the lives we wish to lead. The third is about the groups that we might want to join—freedom to associate with whomever we wish. Mill’s decision to establish these three cases in which liberty is most precious indicate what we might describe as Mill’s concern for the “tyranny of the majority” in Part I of the work. Mill wishes to detract from the power of those he calls “political functionaries” and focus, instead, on the dangers of a society that works “collectively, over the separate individuals who compose it”, whose “means of tyrannizing” can become “more formidable than many kinds of political oppression”.¹¹ Mill argues that social tyranny “leaves fewer means of escape,

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⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 13.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.



JOHN STUART MILL

“If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.”

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was an English philosopher. He is considered one of the most important pioneers of liberalism. Through his father James Mill (1773-1836), a friend of Bentham and a proponent of his ideas, John Stuart also became a champion of utilitarianism. Unlike Bentham, he saw it rather as an art of living, where pleasure is not only about the satisfaction of basic needs, however important they may be, but also about desires for the finer things, such as art and culture. Mill married Harriet Taylor, who would have a great influence on him. He defended women’s rights and in 1867 proposed the introduction of voting rights for women in the British Parliament. Mill has had an enormous influence on the struggle for greater self-determination.

penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself”.¹² For this reason, protection against the government is not enough. The focus needs to shift to “the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose...its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them...”.¹³ The practical issue that grows from these dangers, Mill concludes, is determining the limit between the individual and society.

Mill does provide us with some affirmative statements from which to derive his ensuing thoughts. For example, he writes that man is always sovereign “over himself, over his body and mind...”,¹⁴ and, a couple of paragraphs later, that each man “is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental and spiritual”.¹⁵ We arrive at Part II of the work with sufficient information to infer Mill’s views on what he titles the “liberty of thought and discussion”. That said, his defence of the liberty of thought and discussion is centred around an argument that is worth parsing out. From the outset of the section, Mill discusses the problem of doctrines and their “assumption of infallibility”.¹⁶ The problem with this assumption is that it tends to lead people who adopt a given doctrine to decide that this doctrine is correct for others without granting them the possibility to disagree or decide for themselves. Mill is strongly concerned with dogmas as examples of ingrained social beliefs that are not vigorously debated. He has reason to encourage people to debate their beliefs—for without debate, beliefs become “dead dogma”, not “living truth”.¹⁷ Mill argues, moreover, that beliefs may be partially true, but in order to gradually get closer to the truth of something, society requires “the collision of adverse opinions”.¹⁸ The relationship between thought and discussion, then, is one of mutual contingency: open debate and public discussion cannot take place without the liberty of thought that allows different men and women to develop their unique ideas; likewise, the development of unique ideas can hardly arise in a society where discussion is not free.

Part III of *On Liberty* combines the previous chapter’s two central qualities, liberty of thought and discussion, to explain what becomes of a person who lives in a society where these qualities are valued: a person’s individuality is developed to its fullest. This third part of the work explains why individuality is “one of the elements of well-being” that cannot be dismissed in any political society that values the good of its members. Individuality, then, becomes a central theme of *On Liberty* that requires thorough study. What is individuality? Is it something with which everyone is naturally endowed? Is it something built? Both? Mill describes individuality in the following way, worth quoting in its entirety to fully appreciate the depth of his thought:

But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character. The traditions and customs of other people are, to a certain extent, evidence of what their experience has taught them; presumptive evidence, and as such, have a claim to his deference; but, in the first place,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹⁷ Ibid., 35.

¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

their experience may be too narrow; or they may not have interpreted it rightly. Secondly, their interpretation of experience may be correct, but unsuitable to him. Customs are made for customary circumstances, and customary characters; and his circumstances or his character may be uncustomary. Thirdly, though the customs be both good as customs and suitable to him, yet to conform to custom merely as custom does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being...¹⁹

There are many elements to point out in the above statement. First is the fact that Mill describes individuality as both a privilege and a proper condition for being a human being. For something to be a "privilege", it cannot be something that automatically happens. That said, it is also a proper condition, which means that all human beings should strive towards individuality. Mill's emphasis on the privilege of individuality is key, since it imparts the message that individuality is something which a society must establish *and* preserve;

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it must not be taken for granted. Another important element in Mill's description of individuality is this idea of self-formation after maturity. Man is able to interpret experience in his or her own way. Customs, helpful as they may be, do not replace our personal experience. Most importantly, customs prevent people from developing into individuals, which requires active engagement with the world that is free from any preconceptions.

Another element that merits appreciation in Mill's understanding of individuality is how he expresses the connection between individuality and originality. Mill astutely notices how originality is only valued when we encounter a "genius", someone who can "write an exciting poem" or can "paint a picture", but not when we meet someone who demonstrates "originality in thought and action".²⁰ In reality, the originality of thought and action is the true mark of genius, but we do not view these qualities with

admiration. Mill remarks how "originality is the one thing which unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of".²¹ What he calls the "despotism of custom" is the reason why human advancement is hindered when originality and individuality are hindered, since custom exists in "antagonism to the spirit of liberty or that of progress or improvement".²²

From Mill's writings, we might gather that he is fairly sceptical of the significance of truths, customs, or tradition. After all, Mill's understanding of human nature is progressive, but organically so. In other words, progress or improvement of an individual's skills or mind is a task that cannot be artificially imposed. As Mill writes, "human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency

¹⁹ Ibid., 57.

²⁰ Ibid., 64.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 69

of the inward forces which make it a living thing".²³ Notice Mill's naturalist language that reiterates man's vivacity as a *natural* fact; that is, as something that always takes place, so long as the proper conditions are set for his or her flourishing. In this sense, Mill's philosophical position that views man as a progressive being does have its limit in the individual's natural inclination towards what is good for him or herself.

The final section of the work, Part IV, concludes Mill's thoughts by revisiting our original question about the line between society and the individual. To be sure, Mill does not argue that we as individuals owe nothing to our respective societies; this would be a great misunderstanding of Mill, for he recognises that people who receive protection from living in society owe "a return for the benefit" and cannot live in "selfish indifference" to others.²⁴ Mill at no point argues for self-interest, but he is arguing that in a society where it is important and good to care for one another, we must not confuse this benevolence with telling someone "that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it".²⁵ Indeed, the line that Mill treads between individualism and society in *On Liberty* is so delicate that we can even say that we have not yet found a definitive solution for it, even though Mill provides us with one of the clearest accounts focused on this question.

Conclusions

On Liberty remains a prescient account of some of the most pressing questions that arise in a democratic society grappling with individualism and liberty, on the one hand, and progress and expediency, on the other. After all, the modern state often views progress as a social project, and our liberal tradition is filled with thinkers like T.H. Green and John Dewey who have helped ingrain this idea into public opinion. That said, thinkers like John Stuart Mill remind us that liberty and progress are never opposed; indeed, they work together, but only when individual liberty is not sacrificed in the name of progress. The conclusion to *On Liberty*, which serves as an admonition, summarises it best:

The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it; and a State which postpones the interest of their mental expansion and elevation, to a little more administrative skill, or of that semblance of it which practice gives, in the details of business; a State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes—will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished; and that the perfection of machinery to which it has sacrificed everything, will in the end veil it nothing, for want of the vital power which, in order that the machine might work more smoothly, it has preferred to banish.²⁶

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²³ Ibid., 58.

²⁴ Ibid., 73-74.

²⁵ Ibid., 74.

²⁶ Ibid., 111.





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