

**John Stuart Mill**     *On Liberty* (1859)

(1806-1873)     1st Part - "Of Individuality"

2nd Part - "Individual Liberty and Society"

3rd Part - "Applications"

---

### Mill on freedom of speech and opinion

Necessary to mental well-being of mankind for three reasons:

- (1) A suppressed opinion may be true. To deny this is to assume we are infallible.
- (2) A suppressed opinion may contain a portion of the truth. Prevailing opinion is never the entire truth. Remainder can only be had by allowing contrary opinions to be voiced.
- (3) Even if prevailing opinion is entire truth, it soon becomes dogma without dissention.

Question: Does this freedom extend to actions?

Answer: So long as these actions do not harm others.

In next section, this is Harm-To-Others Principle. This section provides Mill's motivation for it - Namely:

**Claim:** "Free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being." (pg. 150)

In general - Only legitimate ground for social coercion is to prevent someone from doing harm to others.

### Mill on human nature

"It is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at in 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." (pg. 150)

Ability to make choices is essential human characteristic (distinguishes humans from androids)     ⇒     Freedom to decide between choices must exist to be able to realize one's human potential.

Essential human characteristics: perception, judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, moral preference (pg. 151)     ←     To be human is to engage in these faculties. Otherwise, you're an ape engaging in imitation.

### Mill's Worry:

Society places restrictions and prohibitions on such activity - it denies people their humanity.

**Calvinism Example** (pg. 152): Self-will is the one great offense of humans. Obedience is what is good in humans. "Whatever is not a duty is a sin."

Mill: In this way of thinking, humans are like topiary - cramped, dwarfed, crushed versions of their true natures.

Again: "Only the cultivation of individuality produces well-developed humans." (pg. 154)

### Why is Individual Liberty Important?

Why should we care about allowing some people to fully develop?

(1) Practical reason: Promotes progress and improvement.

Letting people to fully develop cultivates geniuses from whom others can learn. Geniuses are only produced in an atmosphere of freedom.

Mill's Worry: Mediocrity is rampant. Eccentricity is frowned upon. ("chief danger of the time" pg 156)  
Despotism of custom stands in the way of individual liberty.

Note: Improvement can occur without liberty, but liberty always guarantees improvement: "By it there are as many possible independent centers of improvement as there are individuals." (pg. 158)

(2) Ethical reason: To allow everyone to obtain their fair share of happiness.

Diversity in modes of life is necessary to maximize happiness.

Assumption: Humans are different ("not like sheep").

### Potential questions:

- (1) Does Mill's practical reason (concern for progress & improvement) conflict with his ethical reason (concern for happiness)? Example: Pre-Modern China. No progress, but happiness might exist. Can custom be tolerant in some respects and repressive in others?
- (2) Mill on democracy and mediocrity. Mill claims freedom and variety of situations requires the existence and perpetuation of such differences as classes, ranks, trades, professions, etc. Can innovation/creativity/progress occur without such differences?