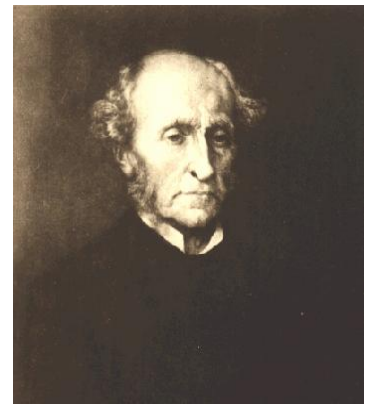


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John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor's *On Liberty*

A Renaissance man born in the Victorian era, John Stuart Mill excelled in every philosophical and political field available including metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of religion, philosophy of education, economics, romanticism, conservatism, political economy, public policy, and of course, liberty. One of his most controversial works, *On Liberty* argued that ultimately individuals were free to do as they pleased as long as they did no harm to others. Published in 1859, Mill contended that he and his wife, Harriet Taylor, had worked together to produce this intellectual masterpiece through intense conversation over the years (Rees, 7).



While Harriet would prove to be influential to many of his writings, specifically those on women's rights, his father, James Mill, probably had the most effect on the ideals of his son. He began teaching him the classics at the age of three; this former shoemaker had high hopes for his son to bring in the new century as the spokesmen for his utilitarian ideology (Kishlansky, ed. 159). At the age of eight, little Johnny was reading Socrates in Greek, Cicero in Latin, and writing Spanish and Roman history. By the age of fourteen, he had already mastered the *Principia Mathematica* of Newton and Adam Smith's, *The Wealth of Nations*. (Capaldi, 6-7). While taught the principles of utilitarianism and radicalism by Bethem and his father, Mill would eventually adjust these viewpoints to fit with the times and

move to romanticism and conservatism. He wrote about the definition of poetry and critiqued many forms thereof. He was also convinced that traditional systems of government should guide societies to do what is best for their citizens.

In *On Liberty*, he states that “mediocre citizens must be ‘guided by the counsels and influence of more highly gifted and instructed minds’” (Duncun, 260). Mill believed that only certain people should rule. He was skeptical of poorly run democracy, especially after reading Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. This analysis provided Mill with more ideas on how liberty should play a role in society. Complete liberty and total political equality in a democracy could not work, simply because of a possible “tyranny of the majority” (Qualter, 883). John Stuart Mill was a man that continually widened his scope of knowledge, making it more complicated to understand exactly what he held to and what he did not. He was not extremely wealthy, but was a member of the upper class during a time of working class conflict.

In *On Liberty*, Mill was writing to a diverse audience. His main listeners were to be the government for which he would become a member of in 1865. He believed the majority of people do not realize the importance of liberty as a “necessary condition of civilization, instruction, education, and culture” and, thus those “highly instructed minds” should acknowledge it and defend it (Mill, 161). He also appealed to the “world at large,” full of regimes that are hampering the freedoms of their population. He warned that “diminishing the power of the individual” is easy to do and tends to become more attractive and grow until “moral conviction” can once again be raised to hinder its efficacy (Mill, 160). He also was responding to moral and social reformers who believed that individualism was detrimental to society. Instead, he felt that “free scope should be given to varieties of character” (Mill, 161).

Sources of the West only provided the reader with a small piece of the introduction of this five-part work. Still, it was here that Mill summarized and articulated his main points. *On Liberty* was an essay that, according to J.S. Mill, was intended for one purpose. It was to assert the principle that “power can only be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will to prevent harm to others” (Mill, 159). In other words, each and every person has the right to do whatever he or she wants as long as it does not hurt his or her fellow man. “Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign” (Mill, 159). He then lists the three forms of liberty each of which must be present for any society to be truly free. Liberty of thought allows people to express themselves. Liberty of pursuits encourages new ideas. Mill insisted that even if these pursuits are deemed stupid or wrong, they should not be thwarted if they are harmless. Lastly, liberty of assembly creates more organized thought and allows a solid base for conviction.

To sum up his claims, Mill asked some practical questions, a method no doubt learned from his Greek philosophy training. The three questions all focus around one, “How much of human life should be assigned to individuality, and how much to society?” (Mill, 161). His answer was that societies should protect their citizens from those who encroach on their rights or those who hinder fulfillment of their pursuits. Individuality should be exercised when only the interests of himself are involved and have no bearing on society as a whole. He ended his introduction maintaining that no one of accountable age has the right to tell anyone else of accountable age what to do.

Mill considered *On Liberty* his greatest work primarily because of the role his wife had in producing it. She passed in 1858, so he simply left it as it was and had it published in 1859. Mill states in his autobiography that they wrote it together to keep Mill from becoming

“over-government” oriented (Mill, 214). *On Liberty* was written at a time when social equality was encouraged and public opinion was gaining power. At the same time, an industrial revolution was continuing to provide new ideas and ways of living that were more individualistic. Mill favored the latter and emphasized that this growing power must be stopped so as not to “stunt and dwarf human nature” (Mill, 216).

His work is in the genre of prose. Referred to by Mill as an essay, *On Liberty* was a five-part document in which Mill attempted to explain his beliefs “on liberty.” It was a mentally accessible piece of literature to any intelligent nineteenth century person. Mill asked his own questions and responded to his own criticisms in the work. Persuasive in nature, his hope was obviously that many Parliament members would read it and consider him in upcoming elections.

An assumption made by Mill was that social reformers were influencing governments too much. To defend human nature’s need to experiment and be spontaneous, he proposed that the liberty of the individual was a necessary component of civilization. He also assumed that working people would warm up to this idea of freedom and self-preservation, and would shy away from government regulation and limits to liberty.

This document is believable for many reasons. The emotional connection with this work and Mill’s wife lead me to believe its validity. The years spent writing it meant that discussion was available for this topic. People were thinking about the extent liberty could reach. J.S. Mill’s autobiography recorded the history of the account. The content of the document is still in use, especially among the libertarians of America. The hands off policy of government when not protecting the interests of its citizens is an issue Mill and libertarians would agree upon.

The society that produced this document was concerned with too much government power. Social reforms had demoralized the man who marched to a different drummer, and Mill wanted to reenergize this type of person. Uniformity was a legitimate threat to human nature at this time. Legislative coercion was occurring; liberty was being threatened.

This document reaffirmed my position that seatbelt laws are ignorant. I am hurting no one, and my liberty to choose whether or not I wear a seatbelt is being limited. I appreciate John's analysis of the growing threat of government's limiting liberty. I especially like his call for "a barrier of moral conviction" to stop this growth (Mill, 160). Although I cannot think of any clever similarities between the two, as it is four a.m., John Stuart Mill and Jon Stewart of the Daily show...have the same name...almost.

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