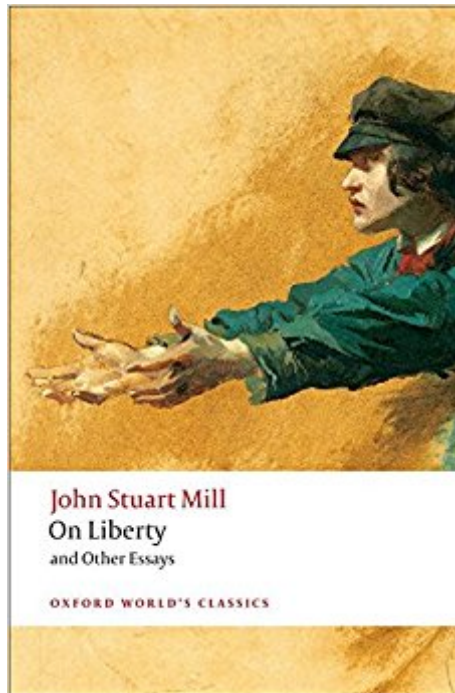




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On Liberty And Other Essays (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

Collected here in a single volume for the first time are John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, *Utilitarianism*, *Considerations on Representative Government*, and *The Subjection of Women*. These essays show Mill applying his liberal utilitarian philosophy to a range of issues that remain vital today--the nature of ethics, the scope and limits of individual liberty, the merits of and costs of democratic government, and the place of women in society. In his Introduction John Gray describes these essays as applications of Mill's doctrine of the Art of Life, as set out in *A System of Logic*. Using the resources of recent scholarship, he shows Mill's work to be far richer and subtler than traditional interpretations allow.

About the Series: For over 100 years Oxford World's Classics has made available the broadest spectrum of literature from around the globe. Each affordable volume reflects Oxford's commitment to scholarship, providing the most accurate text plus a wealth of other valuable features, including expert introductions by leading authorities, voluminous notes to clarify the text, up-to-date bibliographies for further study, and much more.

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Customer Reviews

John Stuart Mill was an English philosopher, politician and economist most famous for his contributions to the theory of utilitarianism. The author of numerous influential political treatises, Mill's writings on liberty, freedom of speech, democracy and economics have helped to form the foundation of modern liberal thought. His 1859 work, *On Liberty*, is particularly noteworthy for

helping to address the nature and limits of the power of the state over the individual. Mills has become one of the most influential figures in nineteenth-century philosophy, and his writings are still widely studied and analyzed by scholars. Mills died in 1873 at the age of 66. Gray is a professor of European thought at the London School of Economics. He is a regular contributor to the Guardian and the Times Literary Supplement.

Great condition

good

Not sure why it asked me all those stupid questions about plot, etc. Anyway, Mill shouldn't need an introduction, but if he does then suffice to say "On Liberty" and some of his other works should be required reading for everybody.

A collection of classics from Mill, while many people misunderstand what he was trying to convey in many of the essays in this book, it is still a vital classic in political theory

This is a great collection of essays by Mill. The introduction is elucidating, albeit controversial (the editor acknowledges that the opinions stated in the introduction are paradoxical). Footnotes would have been preferable to endnotes.

Tough read... Old English prose; but invaluable, nonetheless. Compliments Hayek, Smith, Rand, and the Friedmans' work. Condition of book acceptable ...

On Liberty by John Stuart Mill is an in-depth exploration of the relationship between the individual and authority. Authority in this book refers not only to that imposed by government but also all kinds of societal checks on individual freedom of behavior, speech, and thought, with particular attention to the kind of pressure inherent in most organized religion. Mills begins by stating: "The Subject of this Essay is not the so-called Liberty of the Will, so unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of Philosophical Necessity; but Civil, or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual." Published in 1859, On Liberty was extremely well received and has been in print ever since. Interestingly, Mills began writing the work in 1854 in collaboration with his wife Harriet Taylor. Originally intended as an

essay, it kept expanding in scope until it became a full-fledged book published shortly after Harriet's death. I enjoyed the clarity of thought Mills brings to topic which can be a muddy one with vast areas of gray. When is an individual's action of concern only to him- or herself and when does it affect others enough for society to step in and regulate it? How much tolerance should society have for aberrant behavior, unpopular lifestyle choices, and the spouting of opinions deemed pernicious? According to Mill, a healthy society tolerates a wide berth of eccentricity and welcomes diversity of opinion, primarily because it is only by being challenged that we can truly be strong in our beliefs about what is true. Society is justified in interfering with individual liberty only when the individual's actions cause harm to others. The problems emerge mostly in how we define "harm." Mills seems quite reasonable to me and certainly not an extremist. I think he would have been a libertarian when it comes to restrictions on what substances people choose to imbibe and in favor of zero restrictions on expressions of faith in the public square and in the workplace as long as these expressions of faith are not physically harmful to anyone else. He is most definitive in his support freedom of speech and the press. He is a bit less libertarian when it comes to public education. In fact, as you get toward the end of the book, it becomes apparent that the keys to his vision of a society that allows for maximum individual liberty are universal education and responsible procreation. If people just did not bring children into existence that they were not prepared to feed, shelter, and educate to take a responsible role in society everything would just fine. But to the extent that this happy state of affairs is not exactly fully realized, the state is justified, for the well-being of society, in educating those children whose parents do not or cannot fulfill their most sacred duty. According to Mills, all education sponsored by the state should stick to the basics such as language usage and scientific facts and there must be no requirement that students subscribe to any particular creed or political opinion in order to obtain a certificate of completion. So there are some "ifs" and a bit of Utopian thought here, but all in all this is a great read for anyone who wants to explore the complex many-sided issue of the individual liberty versus interests of society. If this was a complicated issue in 1859 it is more so now as our civilization has become exponentially more interconnected. Since we live in a world where individual liberty is diminishing as the interests of society become increasingly dominant, this great book of social philosophy is a great way to understand how we got where we are and to help us decide if we think it is worth resisting the general trend.

This is much more than a printing of "On Liberty", which comprises only one sixth of the volume. "Utilitarianism", "On Liberty" and "Representative Government" are often published together and it is

very useful to read them in turn because the key principles introduced in "Utilitarianism" underpin the other two books. The addition of "The Subjection of Women" is a bonus.

UTILITARIANISM Bentham had argued that "good" and "evil" were not useful concepts and what mattered was "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" determined by a "felicific calculus", wherein no one pleasure was to be thought superior to another except by duration, intensity, number of people affected etc. In "Utilitarianism" Mill disagrees with Bentham, arguing that quality is more important than quantity. "It is quite compatible with the principle of utility to recognize the fact, that some kinds of pleasure are more desirable and more valuable than others." Who was to determine this? Those with "higher faculties" - which is the intellectual elitism Mill carries forward to the other books. Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if some pleasures are superior to others, thought Mill, then it was proper to encourage all people to strive to achieve the ability to enjoy them. We thus have Mill's revised utilitarianism that is rooted in the progress of mankind.

ON LIBERTY Mill was a libertarian who chose not to base his defence of liberty on natural rights but on his revised utilitarianism that stresses human development: "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions...grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being." Mill argues that freedom is required to allow men to explore all the avenues of human development. Total freedom is impossible so what determines the legitimate boundaries of freedom? Mill distinguishes between self-regarding and other-regarding actions. The former should never be interfered with and the latter subject to limitation only if they harm the legitimate rights of others. For Mill free thought is self-regarding and should not be curtailed, and free thought is worthless without free speech. Mill then adds a utilitarian argument in favour of free speech: if an opinion, whether true or false, is silenced then mankind is necessarily the loser. He advances a number of arguments to support this, concluding with the claim that a climate of freedom is essential for "great thinkers" (intellectual elitism) and "it is as much, and even more indispensable to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature they are capable of" (revised utilitarianism).

Today there is much talk about whether people have the right not to be offended (e.g. the Danish cartoons). Mill thought otherwise and hence his opposition to the blasphemy law. Mill concedes that actions cannot be as free as speech and proposes that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted...in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection." Because he rejects paternalism he rejects interference with self-regarding actions. Mill would not have prevented people from taking drugs and he would have led the opposition to seat belt legislation. A prostitute should be free to ply her trade and a man should be free to get drunk - unless he is a policeman or soldier on duty. Mill states that an individual's actions must not harm the legitimate

"rights" of others, but he defines such "rights" very narrowly and makes it clear they are not synonymous with "interests". Hence unrestricted laissez-faire is permissible. Mill is very reluctant to concede limitations to freedom of action because he believes that any such limitation may be the thin end of the wedge to be used as an argument for some further restriction. Though Mill is a very determined anti-paternalist he makes three exceptions: children, primitive societies and the disabled. Children must be guided until they reach maturity and they must be given compulsory education - something not given legislative force in England until 1871. As for primitive societies Mill was not a typical Victorian believing in the "inherent differences between races. He simply observed the reality of the world at the time but made it very clear any intervention in backward societies must be temporary with the aim to bring about self-government as soon as possible. Though Mill was a libertarian there is just one example where, at first sight, Mill may seem reactionary to modern readers. He wished to restrict the right to have children to those who could prove that they could support them. However, those who today wish others to be allowed to procreate at will do so on the grounds of human rights. Mill based his theories on utilitarianism, and not on rights. There was no welfare state when Mill wrote "On Liberty" and he was concerned with the well-being of children born to people without the means to support them.

CONSIDERATIONS ON REPRESENTATIVE GOVERNMENT

There are three related principal themes in "Representative Government":

1. The application of his revised utilitarianism to government.
2. How to reconcile the competing claims of efficient government and the popular voice.
3. How to combat the danger of the "tyranny of the majority".

Mill's version of utilitarianism led him to say that the first question to ask is whether a form of government develops the desirable moral and intellectual qualities of the citizens. Mill believed that "active" rather than "passive" people create human progress, and political institutions should foster active citizens, and this is best done by giving (almost) everyone, including women, the vote. He also favoured local government and citizen participation on juries. Though Mill wanted citizens to have the vote he did not want them to play too important a role. He was opposed to direct democracy, and favoured representative government because it enabled him to reconcile bureaucratic expertise with the popular voice. As in "On Liberty" Mill insists on the importance of the intellectual elite. Elected representatives should act as a sort of check on government without trying to control it, and should not select members of the Cabinet. Civil servants must be recruited via competitive exams. In discussing the electoral system Mill reveals his concern with the dangers of a "tyranny of the majority" and advocates the Hare system of STV, which most closely mirrors votes. Mill justified this on the grounds of representing minorities, but it is clear that the minority he was primarily concerned with was the educated elite, which Mill wished to further bolster via plural

voting. Extra votes were to be allocated to people based on educational achievement, but Mill was writing before universal education in England so in the meantime bosses should have more votes than employees (because they had to think more in their duties) and foremen should have more votes than those under them. Today he would no doubt wish to give extra votes for passing exams at 16, 18, and at degree level. Were Mill to return now I suspect he would be relieved that his worst fears over a "tyranny of the majority" have not come to pass but would be concerned that politicians are too often more concerned with popular policies than good policies.

THE SUBJECTION OF WOMEN

This book too is imbued with Mill's version of utilitarianism. Mill denied that women were in any way inferior to men and declared that withholding the vote held back their development. Not only did women themselves lose out as individuals but so too did society.

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