

On Liberty Study Guide

On Liberty by John Stuart Mill

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Plot Summary

This is a book of modern philosophy. In this sense, modern means the 19th century. The main topic is human liberty. Being quite pragmatic, the author is intent upon civil liberty. As such, this is a socio-political work, the very arena where matters of law and of philosophy come together.

The author is John Stuart Mill, although he cites Harriot Taylor as having made extremely significant contributions to the text. He says that to refer to her as co-author as well as a kind of private editor would be close to the truth if not more true than to exclude from being so indicated. In current language it might be put this way: John Stuart Mill with Harriot Taylor, or John Stuart Mill and Harriot Taylor. The times and the cultural transformations that were influencing the authors when they wrote this piece were in some great part their very inspiration for it. As testament to the author's wishes, at times both will be referred to as co-authors or as author and assistant whereas at other times the old fashioned convention of defining John Stuart Mill as the author will be used.

He, or they, has written the book in such a way that anyone literate with a decent mind can read it. Given that so many have perhaps been accused of having been intentionally obscure, great numbers who might be put off by the fanciest of language will be relieved to find this work couched in quite straightforward language. The author and his helper cover a variety of aspects of how individuality and human liberty function within the nation.

The author begins the book by introducing readers to the over all situation with respect to the topic. He then proceeds in good order through five chapters to explore the sociology of the individual's freedom of thought and discussion. Individuality and the mechanisms of society are examined in tandem. The final chapter draws conclusions and sets out points based upon this improved understanding of the relationship between the authority of the state and the nation and the individual. When the book ends people should have a clear sense of how their own life is free from—and in other respects, legitimately controlled by—the authority of the government.

John Stuart Mill and Harriot Taylor cover a variety of main components of legally related matters of liberty. The entire discourse is directed toward the England in which they lived. As such, it may provide a biased view for non-English readers. The limitations and extents of social behavior from the individual perspective are surveyed. He covers some issues with special regard for what makes intervention in the lives of others genuinely beneficial, and when is the reality a legal justification to invade and excessively limit the liberty of another individual. How this relates to criminality is also discussed. The reason for this is quite obvious: to foster rife crime or anything that goes against the common good is to err on the side of inaction. However, when laws are bent so that certain members of the society can tyrannize others then the lawmakers have in fact gone too far and have turned against the common good of their fellow citizens and other members of the society.



The book includes and then concludes with a few recommendations for a part of the British government concerned with domestic policies. The work over all is timely and relevant to the people of England. Despite its limitations for present day readers, especially for those who are not British, it provides a good look at how philosophy can be turned into something practical, which has long been known to be a matter of some concern. It is a mixture of the following ingredients: current politics, political theory, philosophy, the liberal movement in England, "social progressivism", Jeremy Bentham's movement towards social reform and improvement for England, ethical/moral philosophy, applied philosophy.



Book 1, Prefaces Etc. : Chapter 1, Prefaces

Book 1, Prefaces Etc. : Chapter 1, Prefaces Summary and Analysis

The material in this section is devoted to preparing the readers for the text. It begins with a simple chronological chart set alone upon a page. This intimates to the truth that many editions of the book are well designed to be used as part of an educational system. While they are equally accessible to the lay person, they are devised to facilitate discussion with professors and to be readily used by university instructors. The chronological chart is a perfect example of how those who have prepared the document intended to put the book's contents and life of the author into a wider context using as few words as possible.

What follows that is an introduction to the author, or authors. John Stuart Mill credits his wife with so much of the endeavor that he writes that she is virtually his co-author, something which is not terribly uncommon today but less likely to meet with social disapproval as it once was.

The author is a philosopher and has been handed down, or elevated depending upon one's point of view to part and parcel of any Western tradition of philosophy that one finds. He is viewed as having been the most prominent thinker who's native language was English in the 19th century, ergo, the 1800s. This is yet another reason why many editions of this work have been so clearly prepared to be handled within the context of higher education. He was privately educated, home schooled, but his father was an educated man. However, his education, while very strong in the humanities, was clearly weak in science and mathematics and there is minimal indication of art, music or athletics in his education. What he did receive was excellent within its limitations and prepared him well for the social and political work that he came into later in life.

Both the man and his wife, who had spent a very long time being exclusively and specifically an intellectual and emotional companion: a real friend, but certainly no lover. This is a situation also less unusual ever since education has been turned into a coeducational experience and higher education has been opened to women. Her husband, to his credit, understood what was actually going on and simply asked that they take him into account and proceed with sufficient caution as to guard his dignity.

The two friends did this. Part of their intellectual work was to face and address some of the least popular aspects of culture: the world of crime and legislation relating to it. They

covered both the topics of prostitution and of the narcotic drugs with respect to their culture and time. To some degree, given the period, this strongly suggests but does not guarantee that the two were urban people, which is in fact the case.



James Mill, the father of John Stuart and Jeremy Bentham loomed large in relevance in England during John Stuart's earliest years. Bentham was able to rely upon James Mill's support in ideas and the later had sufficient means to be able to financially provide for the man who turned out to be a journalist rather than a priest.

John Stuart Mill turned out to be a dream come true to the progressive women's movement, as he was an outspoken advocate of women's rights who sincerely believed in the innate equality of women and that it should be represented by women being included within the law as bearing full rights of citizenship. Decades before it succeeded, but far from the first attempt: Mary Wollstonecraft had managed to publish *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* a good century earlier, Mill had a personal hand in striving to get women voting rights in Great Britain.

While far from a recounting of the entire contents, this gives a clear indication of the manner of information found within the multiple introductions within the book. While there is bound to be some variation amongst editions, one will find that the bulk of what follows after this will be virtually identical with the sole exception being page numbers.



Chapter 1, Introductory

Chapter 1, Introductory Summary and Analysis

Almost immediately, the author makes it clear that when he refers to liberty he means societal liberty. The focus is the 'rights of man within the state or nation.' As Britain was but one example of an aristocracy, he proceeds to show how this developed amongst the people as a method of opposing, not a beloved and trustworthy monarch, but to guard against and to thwart the powers of tyranny within a given nation.

He goes on to put this into historical context should readers not be aware of how this has been addressed over the centuries. He does not confine his criticisms to his own nation but addresses the situations throughout Europe. There was a Continental attitude towards 'self-government' as an idea that was international. For American readers, he explains that Europeans have a unique sense of unity that has co-existed right along with a great deal of political differences and variances in the ways of life of the peoples. The British have long been connected to this but culturally their location as a pair of islands set apart from the Continentals has qualitatively influenced the way that Britain relates to the 'Continental Europeans.' There was a great movement toward greater independence for the peoples of Europe along with increased rights for a larger portion of the populace. Reduced property restrictions and other qualities altered who could be citizens and who hoped to be, or to become so. Amongst the British, women were one of the categories of members of society who were actively seeking increased rights, responsibilities and liberties within the nations of the Empire, particularly on the isles of Britain herself.

Many of the Europeans were or recently had been living under the authority of monarchies and aristocracies. The authors address the issue of tyranny but John Stuart Mill goes a step further. He directly confronts a reality that lurks potently beneath the surface of changes in political structures. More democracy, whether as part of how a people are governed or as a type of government, brings with it the danger of the tyranny of the people over one another. His ancient predecessor Aristotle, in his work *Politics*, referred to this as factions within a political system. In Mill's case, he typically does not mean violent factions, but is endeavoring to educate readers on how to be more self-governing. The additional responsibilities, he asserts, will include how to cooperate amongst 'themselves' or 'ourselves' when there is no longer the authority of the Crown to chaff against and therefore to blame for the trouble.

In this chapter he examines the role of both legal and nonlegal means of controlling people and begins to set forth a proposed idea for a behavioral dictum. With regard to personal behavior, he espouses that each individual in essence deserves the freedom to do as he or she wills and wishes given the limitation that to thwart, oppress or oppose the will of others is wrong. He then proceeds to express that despite the reality that this idea is far from new, it is relatively rarely the case in reality. Reasons for this, he informs readers, are that both law and public opinion have a tendency to conspire against the



individual's liberty and freedom of action. He specifies that this needs to be recognized but also addressed. While he does not directly mention women in particular, most readers will concede that females have a great tendency to socially influence one another beyond and without the use of the law and can lay down harsh, if often nonviolent punishments and retributions for failures to conform to the 'women's standards' for behavior particular to a given societal niche or economic class. While far from the sole force, John Stuart Mill has simply indicated that men's public opinions, women's and the laws of the nation are all deeply important in how the freedom of each individual is affected by that of the others.

Finally, he prepares readers for the next chapter. He points out that in many cultures, including the ancient Greeks to which present day readers can also refer through the same tradition of knowledge as Mill, private behavior was publicly regulated to intense extremes. The movements towards individuality that is released from such encroachments are a sign, according to the philosopher, of hope for the future.



Chapter 2, Of the Liberty of Thought & Discussion

Chapter 2, Of the Liberty of Thought & Discussion Summary and Analysis

John Stuart Mill begins this chapter by introducing a discourse regarding opinion and the expression thereof. The author claims that the silencing of opinion is a bad thing, a specific kind of evil. He asserts that some efforts by society to improve the freedom of individuals for giving their opinion on a given topic is helpful.

Mill believes that freedoms of speech as a means of clear expression of opinion has the possibility of advancing humanity through the discovery and use of the truth. Sharing views can in fact enhance life for everyone. He notes the importance for learning to at least tolerate hearing the opinions of others, including dissenting ones. He asserts his own view that even if only one individual on the entire face of the Earth holds a particular opinion that he or she still has a legitimate claim to have that opinion and to have the safety to at least verbally express it, or to otherwise do so inasmuch as no one else is harmed through doing so. A now popular case is not so much opinion, but has some aspect of this quality to it.

It is now a well known fact that Copernicus harbored the opinion that he had superior knowledge of the Solar system to that of the dominant Church and scientists of his location and time in history. His knowledge could easily have been mistaken for 'mere belief' or 'opinion' by himself or others. However, that was not what was limiting it. His view was extremely unpopular and met with a great deal of derision and persecution.

Centuries later, however, his unpopular opinion has been accepted as true knowledge which has proliferated to the point of being 'common knowledge.' That is, 'everyone knows this' who is able to know it. Just as this epitomizes one benefit of sharing opinions and having the willingness to listen to the views of others, there is also another.

The other major benefit of giving freedom and safety to voice individual opinions within society is so that those who are mistaken can come to see the truth. Anyone with emotions can see why this might be a concern. An opinion may be a powerful 'thing' however intangible, and even so an opinion is often quite vulnerable to attack once exposed. At this point, the author recommends that people keep an eye to discerning what the truth is over countering or simply attacking a particular opinion. By exposing opinions people gain the opportunity of having their errors corrected, as well as creating the chance to correct the mistakes of others or of enriching the consciousness of both or all those involved.

The entire chapter is devoted to discussing the range of aspects and implications of opinion. The author mentions lightly how one goal of education during the now infamous



Middle Ages had been to encourage students to think for themselves and to argue matters through. What was often exposed was the extent to which logical premises had been founded upon knowledge taken from authority rather than derived from experience or from one's own mind. One perfect example of this is the somewhat shocking realization that for millions, if knowledge of the solar system were not proliferated and supporting information both provided and explained the majority would probably not conclude from direct personal experience that the planets travel around the Sun. Many people would not even think about it. The only reason humanity on the whole knows the truth is thanks to those who not only thought about it, but researched the matter intensively and extensively and then that knowledge was shared.

John Stuart Mill goes on to show that the real challenge is to face the conflict that can emerge when opinions are shared with a view to obtaining the truth of any given matter. He points out that apparently irrespective of whether or not people are learned, there is a tendency, in the 1800s in England, for people to teach themselves one side of an argument but not to educate themselves in the opposing views. This has changed to some degree in some aspects of 20th and 21st Century higher education, but in many respects is as commonplace for all the readers of today as it was for the contemporaries to whom the work was originally directed. The philosopher argues in favor of people learning to at least face and confront their opposition if not to thoroughly learn it's viewpoint. He admits that purely destructive attacks against an opinion at variance from one's own are most likely not wise but that when the clash of opposition changes both and brings everyone involved closer to the truth then this is indeed progress. As such, a significant social project then, is to put this simple idea into practice. Everyone who knows what it means to hold a passionate opinion or idea understands that this may not always be easy.



Chapter 3, Of Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being

Chapter 3, Of Individuality as One of the Elements of Well-Being Summary and Analysis

The author continues the discourse from whence he had left off at the end of the preceding chapter. Here he takes the matter under discussion deeper, into the individuality of people within a society. As the entire work is focused upon divining the proper limitations of individual liberty and governmental authority this same task is turned to here.

Here John Stuart Mill addresses the impact of how opinions are expressed within a societal context. He differentiates between the legitimate use of free speech and the acts of instigation and provocation. He claims that expressing any opinion and having it published and circulated in the press in general is simply the use of free speech. However, he says, taking a dissenting position loudly before an already angry mob that is in an agitated situation is not free speech but is incitement and therefore legally need not be treated as having been 'innocent use of free speech.'

After this, the philosopher goes on to describe a matter of great importance. Another philosopher, one of the many Germans prominent in the field during the 19th century, Wilhelm Von Humboldt, assured people that the greatest goal in the holistic development of humanity is to be complete and whole. All of the philosophical and political gyrations that human populations go through are part of this entire process. What every individual needs, Humboldt expressed, are "freedom & variety of situations" in order to learn themselves fully. Many would argue against this for the sake of avoiding that which might well be best left uncultivated within an individual namely that most commonly called 'evil' and that 'freedom within certain situations' tend to nurture 'evil' or the harsher and possibly more rash or more self-serving and cruel aspects of one's character. Nevertheless, the desire that Humboldt put forth, for humanity to be whole, and the method of exploration that he suggests combined with the systematic thinking and exploration of ideas that John Stuart Mill and Harriot Taylor express as explorable through what nowadays might be termed 'thought experiments' all tend to assist the process of thought towards arrival at the whole truth of life and of the reality for people.

The human nature and character of individuality finding their proper place and balance within the society are of great concern to the philosopher. He discusses briefly the very real problem that the individual with strong impulses and feelings but without discipline and control and well developed conscience can in fact be a very serious problem to every society. He says that during such stages in the history of England, the number of prisoners within the population increased as a direct effort on the part of the whole to control the behavior of such people. He says that religion has also had a hand in such



efforts. However, he insists to readers that the strong individual, the active ones, and those of strong passions, emotions, impulses and energies are not an inherent problem for any nation. The Victorian age, in the English context from which he wrote the book, had gone too far the other way, in his view, suppressing to an excess the freedom and energy of individuality. Discipline and control along with sufficient opportunities to express the nature are all conducive to a healthy and vigorous individual and society, according to Mill.

He finishes the chapter still working in conjunction with Humboldt. Freedom and variety of situations, he claims are under attack, most especially the latter. He refers to the Chinese, asserting as something negative that their culture endeavors to make everyone alike. He posits that something similar has been taking place in Europe and then defends this remark by stating that both the French and the English have begun to be physically more like one another in but one or two generations than had ever previously been the case. There is not sufficient information to determine whether the philosopher was correct or whether this was a generalized observation made of some truth that was not universal. For example, many people amongst even the ancient Greeks lived past the age of 70 years, and ancient Hebrews referred both to peoples who lived for centuries as do some trees even now, even though others died before age 30. In Europe and Britain, especially during the plagues, so many died young that many people jumped to the wrong conclusion that everyone died before age 50 when that was not the truth everywhere.

Diversity of situations, John Stuart Mill repeated, is needed and beneficial to humanity on the whole. Improved communications and other systems that 'break down distance' have an adverse affect upon this process since separation is often conducive to at least some individuation. He describes this as a loss and refers to the rapidly passing era when every village had it's own ways and greater dissimilarity from the next than is the case when the two are frequently united. The Germans have provided a grand support of Mill's statement by having such diversity amongst the common people of language, that one might pass a village or two over and barely be able to even understand the people who live there as they are as distinctive as if the next town were the next nation. With this, Mill moves on to his next analysis.



Chapter 4, Of the Limits to the Authority of the Society over the Individual

Chapter 4, Of the Limits to the Authority of the Society over the Individual Summary and Analysis

The approach of this chapter is much like that of the rest. The tone is somewhat objective but is as close to oratory with a conversational attitude as is possible through the written word. It is not so much that the author comes across as desiring to be monologic, which every book cannot entirely help but be, but even so it is that he drives to get a thorough look at the issue at hand. Often times, to keep the mind and the process well ordered, normal 'round house' discussions are insufficient as too much diversity gets participants off track and the whole matter is left at a lower level of progress than might otherwise be attained. Even so, this describes the author's tone and writing style. He is semi-objective, which is to say, that he is aiming at the truth while acknowledging that the entire matter is about his own subjectivity along with the societal context, which is a form of reality all its own.

He again begins with this question: What amount of sovereignty does each individual preserve over himself or herself, and to what extent does the government or the attendant culture and community have a just claim to control the individual? The author pursues this investigation by taking a few examples and looking at an individual's conduct with respect to the two most significant questions: What are the implications on the surrounding community? What damage would be done to the individual by restricting his [or her] liberties and controlling the person's behavior? The philosopher makes it clear that in his view both sets of actions and consequences need to be taken into account. This analysis leads to John Stuart Mill and Harriot Taylor showing how there are in fact times when the interference and control of the individual by the state or nation is entirely legitimate and the preferred course of action. Readers should be aware that one strength of *On Liberty* is that one can transfer the applicability of the principles and observations made to the present culture and time. For those who have been reading a great deal of aged texts, it is 'charming' that this classic was written when the United States had actually come into existence.

The author makes it clear that he is opposed to intoxicants. While the use of drugs as medicines under certain circumstances may be warranted to reduce suffering associated with broken limbs or surgical procedures he is against drunkenness and other artificially induced 'highs.' He spends a little time to supporting the efforts in America to prohibit alcohol and declares in no uncertain terms that he is against the use of fermented beverages for pleasure.

Aside from the issues of morality which can be thorny, but often enough are not, the philosopher takes up the matter of days off from work. He favors the notion of 'the Sabbath' but without the requirement of a religious justification. In this regard, this is



much like those sometimes called 'humanists' who feel that belief in God is not a requirement in order for people to be kind or benevolent to one another.

From here he takes up the matter of 'persecution' in general as a reaction of people to others. In this respect he is writing from the perspective of being the Englishman that he is. He is referring at least as much to his own and others' reactions to persecute others as he is to the problem of people struggling to survive persecution. This stems, he says, from some sense that whatsoever one holds dear with belief, it becomes a strong habituated response to oppose its reverse. He cites for examples fierce objections against there being open Museums on Sabbath days within the city of London. The reason being that this countermands a religious law. After this he addresses Mormonism, and in an earlier chapter he cited Unitarians whose radical nature has a different cause.

Readers may find that whilst Unitarians face little persecution in the present society, Mormons most certainly still do when they actually openly practice polygamy which is illegal in many states and nations. Unlike midwives, however, they have a religious claim to their practice. John Stuart Mill observes that the Mormons suffer from the weakness of the actual foundation or knowledge of what their religion is founded upon along with a core problem: Why is their sect specifically permitted to practice a system of multiple wife marriage even though this is specifically prohibited by scripture for the other sects of the same religion- Christianity? Why this practice arouses more disruption amongst the European peoples is not ever explained. John Stuart Mill recognizes this and also does not explain it, but shows how that social practice has caused that denomination or sect to experience a tremendous amount of persecution but realistically probably nothing worse than the Protestants who were burned at the stake for translating the Bible into German or something like that.

The entire proceeding is done to show some delineations of when it is for the common good that a given individual be subjected to greater control and sovereignty of the state or nation. The philosopher wisely included issues relating to self-examination. Controversy, and the emotions that it gives rise to are all covered by the author. Through this method he is at least attempting to teach or to remind readers that strong differences of opinion will often be lived with and that people can train themselves so as to be free of being the sort who persecutes others. Criminals who are interfered with by the law are being subjected to additional controls and greater sovereignty of the nation or state. The purpose behind the intervention is to protect the community and the regulations governing the rest of the individuals, and perhaps hopefully to protect the well-being of the one who committed the crime or crimes from whatever it was that caused that individual to commit the crimes in the first place.

All of this has been done in preparation for the author to take the discourse to the next level.



Chapter 5, Applications

Chapter 5, Applications Summary and Analysis

The author begins by stating, slightly ornately, that he is now interested in figuring out how to apply the principles that he has discussed so far. Mainly, he wants to see how these can be applied within the culture, England in particular, as laws of the government. He also wants to see and to understand the best means of implementing these to the moral advantage and improvement of the culture. He takes readers through this in a sensible sequence.

The tone of the book continues with consistency. It is written rather objectively and is like contemporary nonfiction books in that it is about 'real life.' That being the case there are a wide variety of references which show the English culture in its Victorian condition. There is no reason to assume that the author did nor did not presume that he, along with the woman Harriot Taylor were creating any kind of classic of literature. His intentions appear to be to be coming up with something useful to his contemporaries within the 'liberal movement.' The language is such that the author has made it unnecessary to be quite worldly or well versed in philosophy or political theory but there are silent assumptions made that include an awareness of English politics and society in the second half of the 1800s.

He discusses trade. There is more than one aspect to this that the author addresses. One aspect, is the matter of Free Trade. By this he means that the state will not regulate the manufacturing and marketing of products but that competition in the marketplace without monopoly. In other words, with actual choice amongst competing goods and services, is the best way to find out whose items will continue to be found at market and whose will recede into the background. Clearly, part of the reason for this discussion is so that readers of the author's time period and culture can make political decisions that are directly relevant to them. For today's readers many of the points remain salient although they are a bit different due to the time and context. Laws that regulate what is allowed to be on the market and what not are mentioned. For the most part, the philosopher urges, no action need be taken the government. In other cases, as in the case of poisons, more legislation is needed.

John Stuart Mill completes the book *On Liberty* by making a few incredibly important assertions about the state, which in this context seems to mean nation or county. He points out that the mental capabilities and other attributes of the members of society need to be nurtured. He states that it is definitely immoral for a government to deny its own people development. He adds that to curtail their nurturance, inclusive of their intellectual abilities is immoral. The way that JS Mill's ancient predecessor Aristotle would have expressed the same thing would be to say that to drive the people down into being more slavish and less independent of will and of thought is to make a grievous error. To do so is unethical. He implies that there are various social policies

that work to make the best of the citizenry, especially those who are poor and others that are not. At the end of the text, he is openly referring to the Poor Law Board.



Characters

John Stuart Mill

This is the author of the main text. He was an Englishman. A brief autobiographical sketch is outlined in the introductory material. He has also written an autobiography that is entitled *Autobiography*, published for the first time in 1873. It is but one of his major works and intended for those who have taken such an interest in his work that they have developed a curiosity regarding the details of his life.

The bulk of his success came after he suffered a 'nervous collapse.' This was apparently some symptom of having to make a deep and major change in his beliefs due to alterations in long held personal beliefs or family history. The affect was so noticeable as to be impossible to avoid. It also shows that although he made a major shift from what his elders had presumed about him, he continued to progress into success. As such, it shows that he was able to overcome adversity and that people needn't 'write off' those who suffer from such troubles.

The majority of this man's literary works fall well within what has been defined as the 'canon' of the Western philosophical tradition. The English are understandably very proud of him as his thinking was so powerful as to reign within a philosophical context which had not been dominated by the English. In fact, much of his work occurred near to the era of the works of the German philosopher's Hegel and Nietzsche both of whom continue to be held in great esteem.

In addition to the power of his written works as a philosopher, other facets of his working life were also rather impressive. Much of it involved following in his father's footsteps and taking matters to their next level of progress. Through his service to the Crown and to the British people as a Member of Parliament he lived out what ancient Grecian predecessors such as Plato and Aristotle would have advocated very much as fulfilling the role of one of the statesman, thereby fulfilling, within the bounds of the British constitutional monarchy, the 'citizen ideal' of being both a philosopher and a statesman.

He was a great friend to women, having remained loyal to his belief in the equality of the female gender. He was able to promote this in both his private and professional life. His lengthy work with a great woman friend with whom he had an intellectual relationship in an era when this was made challenging by cultural forces. He remarks in the work *On Liberty* that his wife, a thinker in her own right, was a veritable co-author through her work as an editor and examiner of his thoughts and the contributions of her own.

Harriet Taylor

This English woman was a self educated intellectual. For many years she was an intellectual friend of John Stuart Mill's. Despite challenges that have grown more familiar in the contemporary coeducational atmospheres of the 20th and 21st centuries, the two



were able to have a long term friendship while maintaining boundaries that respected her husband on one end and their need to carry on their relationship on the other end. She viewed herself as his intellectual inferior but this should not be misconstrued as many a brilliant man would have felt the same way.

After the death of her husband of many years, the intimacy of their friendship either allowed or forced the two into a marriage with one another. It is not clear from the introduction to the text of the Penguin Classic edition whether it was simply that they felt compelled to wed since others were so intolerant of their affinity and intimacy or whether it was rather that since she had become widowed through no fault of either of theirs they decided that they could at least try being romantically involved with one another after all.

Their own marriage was rather brief as the truth was that both were suffering from consumption. Nevertheless their time together was treasured.

James Mill

This was a rather prominent Englishman. He devoted a great deal of his energies to work in the East India Company. However, he came under the powerful influence of Jeremy Bentham and as such was brought into a major cultural effort at reformation within the British society.

He was the father of John Stuart Mill who James Mill took an active benevolent interest in. Thanks to James in conjunction with the work and financial backing of Bentham, a high quality liberal arts education was provided as part of his role as father. He was able to instruct his son in Greek amongst other things. In those days, to receive proper training in Greek and/or in Latin opened doors to the vast realm of classical literature as translations were still often rarely available.

James Mill's original higher educational training was towards the role of cleric, but it turned out that this did not really suit him. He was able to transform into a journalist. His work with Bentham, as a promoter of Bentham's ideas boosted his writing career. Ultimately, he was a profound progressive thinker, which turned up later on when he was 'expected' to lead a group known as 'Philosophical Radicals' within the British realm.

As mentioned above he worked with the East India Company, the demands of which were surprisingly complex. His experiences led him into an administrative form of leadership within the organization.

Jeremy Bentham

This was a 'giant' in English culture during the Victorian period. He was an original thinker and a great reformist. His work must be understood to have had a direct and powerful influence upon the author John Stuart Mill, and his father James Mill. Due to



the other connection with the East India Company the thinker's power was 'amplified' and 'strangely pervasive' within the sphere of British power.

He is mentioned directly at the very beginning of the book, during the material provided by the currently living scholars. The type of philosophy Bentham espoused has been labeled utilitarianism.

Alan Ryan

This is the editor of this and a few other works published in the same vein. Most of his labor is and is rightfully invisible to readers with respect to JS Mill's discourse. He has also contributed an introduction for readers. His contribution was made in 2006 whereas the original publication of *On Liberty* occurred in 1859.

Alan Ryan has written two published books on JS Mill while serving as a university professor or Warden. He has devoted a great deal of energy to the liberal movement in philosophy.

Mary Wollstonecraft

She is mentioned in the very earliest introductions before the text itself by the editor. This is because her work from the previous century was taken up by the women's movement but also forms part of the tradition of women in philosophy.

Due to the peculiar nature of the cultures and times, whilst certainly subdominant, both she and Harriet Taylor constitute the reality of women in English philosophy. Of the two, the former was more prominent.

Wilhelm von Humboldt

A German thinker who influenced JS Mill. He is not only referred to but quoted midway through the text of *On Liberty*. He was one of the 'smaller big names' meaning that while he is most certainly remembered a century after his death as important, it will be another few hundred years before humanity will have decided whether he was good but minor or if he is going to end up like Socrates, veritably immortalized by the living.

Jean Jacques Rousseau

This Frenchman is still famous for novels that he wrote back in the 1700s. He is referred to by JS Mill in chapter 2 of *On Liberty*. The name comes up when Mill is discussing the changing of opinion that coincides with discoveries of how much less unlike his own contemporaries were the ancients. He admits that there is a difference but that it is unfortunately not solely an improvement in mankind, which is a sad truth.



Tocqueville

This is another important Frenchman. His name appears in more than one location within the text. He is not so much of a 'giant' but a discernible recurrent influence. He was another thinker of the century.

Tudor

This is the surname of one of Britain's aristocratic families. They were no longer the family whose heir would become the monarch of the land. He mentions them as a reference point to 'a long time ago but well within English cultural memory'.

God

This entity, whose existence has been a matter of passionate debate with extensive cultural and religious implications for millennia now is the name popularized through association with the Jews prior to the time of Christ, who is a major figure for those using the 'Western man's calendar.' God is mentioned more than once during the book and is referred to in relation to more than one religion.

Calvin

This name is mentioned in chapter 2. The only reason this individual can be mentioned without strife is due to the distance in both time and location from the present. This man was one of the key figures of the Protestant Reformation which, centuries after the last stake burning, is "okay."

Isaac Newton

This man is referred to in chapter 2. He had retained a great reputation in the current culture's mind, at least amongst the educated because he made progress and order in the areas of mathematics and of physics. 'Newtonian mechanics' thought found to be limited in their applicability, have served humanity for centuries since Newton's life ended.

Socrates

This was a Greek philosopher made famous by a man named Plato who, unlike Socrates, actually wrote some books. He is mentioned in chapter 3, due to the significance of how he could show people the difference between knowledge drawn in conclusion from careful investigation and a thin veil of convention over great ignorance.



Plato

This Greek philosopher comes up more than once in the book. This is mainly because his work has been preserved and his thinking has been passed on, either in agreement or as a point of difference for over two thousand years now.

He wrote down a great deal of the elenctic method which he was taught by a man who was his senior contemporary: a much 'lower class' man of Athens, Socrates.

Plato served humanity in the long run both by preserving the work of Socrates and by then proceeding to do impressive philosophical work especially in epistemology-knowledge, in his own right.



Objects/Places

London, England

This city is the birthplace of John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham and Harriot Taylor. This is in any ways of little surprise London having long been a large urban center. The Romans had done what they could with the area and had called it Londinium. London was the political capital of Great Britain's civil run parliamentary system which functions under the Monarch but with the aristocrat's blessing and with a tremendous degree of independence and liberty apart from that office. This continues to be the case today, where the monarch provides a few select affirmations and contributions to the Parliament while remaining 'aloof' and letting the elected officials handle their duties without interference.

The changes in how the Parliament relates to the Crown and to the constitution is far to complex to go into here, but it is relevant to be aware that at various points throughout the history of Britain 'the people' and the monarchy have 're-negotiated' their 'deal' with respect to how the governance of the nation is handled.

Avignon

This is the location where John Stuart Mill and Harriot Taylor lived their last days. John Stuart Mill spent half of each year after her death there, in part he claimed, to address the acuteness of his continued longing to be near to her, even if it meant being near to her grave.

As the name implies, it is French. It is currently a city in the Southeastern region of France. While the population and development and aspects of culture have changed it is the same place that it was when Mill & Taylor Mill lived there.

The English, despite the strife between themselves and the French, have often loved to travel to France. The reason being is that France is one of the most accessible "warm and sunny places" to the English. This continues to be the truth.

East India Company

This was a company that was heavily involved with East India and Great Britain as the name implies. It is mentioned repeatedly in the book due to its personal relationship with the author of the book. The author and his father both worked with this company.



Member of Parliament

Not exactly an object in the usual sense. This is the title used to refer to the British version of highly important representatives of the British people in and as part of the government. The extent and method of their function is unique. Together their duty is to provide a number of administrative functions and legislative capacities for the British people.

Buddhism

This is a religion the author mentions in chapter 2. Essentially, to readers this means that despite the time differential one discovers that JS Mill was rather worldly or at the very least well aware of some diversity amongst people.

lions

These come up in chapter 2 as well. JS Mill mentions them exclusively in reference to the ancient Roman Imperial practice of throwing Christians to lions as a particular form of punishment under certain conditions. The lions were apparently kept for the purpose of punishing humans deemed criminal by Roman laws of some kind.

steam-engine

Chapter 3 bears the reference to this mechanical device. It is noted in context for its power, which was great during the author's time. Much as some enthusiasts may be saddened by this, JS Mill refers to this specifically to point out that such a machine has neither character nor individuality with respect to personality.

individuality

This comes up repeatedly in the book and in fact, the third chapter is named after it. While not an object in the same sense as an inanimate one, this is the sum total of all that makes a living individual unique. However, it is often, though not only used to indicate the 'intangible' elements of the person. For example, preference for style of clothing would be included whereas finger prints although relevant are normally not thought of as 'what is meant by individuality.' JS Mill considers it to be of great importance throughout the discourse and much of the work is about 'this' in relation to society.

character

This plays a large part in the book On Liberty. It is a way of describing the ethical attitude and mindset that dictate an individual's behavior. It is viewed as simultaneously



integral to a person's identity and yet changeable for better, worse or some bizarre combination thereof. While sometimes associated with personality and persona, it is often meant to 'the part that religion and philosophy touch the most, or try to.' Conscience and the soul are intimately linked to character and to behavior. When there is no liberty of action, however, the soul and character of a person may go unexpressed.

poisons

Poisons come up in chapter 5. The author has begun to explicate to readers how government regulation of certain things does make sense. He refers clearly to the relationship between their use and whether or not they should be banned. For example: if a poison was known to be used for murder then it should be made illegal, but if it is a cleanser that happens to also be poisonous but will be used for washing rather than for homicide then it should probably be legal to trade it on the open market. A huge portion of readers will realize that they have poisons in their home because they are ingredients in powerful cleansers.

employers

These are referred to in chapter 5. While not a thing in the inanimate sense of the term they are a category of people often hidden behind the name of a money earning organization that will hire people in an exchange of work-for-pay arrangement. These vary a great deal, but some nations depend upon them to reduce poverty by hiring people and in exchange for having labor and potential and actual customers for their products or services.

opium

This is a pain killing substance that can double as an intoxicant when there is little or no pain present. It is referred to by JS Mill in chapter as an item that is prohibited for sale by the British to the Chinese, or to export to China through Britain.

Mormonism

This is a sect of Christianity which is unusual for two major reasons. First, like many forms of Protestantism, it emerged long after the arrival of Mohammed and the founding of Islam amongst and for the Arabs. The other reason was the same when JS Mill wrote the book as it is for readers today: the practice of polygamy, or the allowance for one man to have more than one wife at a time. Often illegal and very controversial, there is often cultural denial of whether or not polygamy—or polygyny, which is many husbands to one wife—could ever be alternative 'cures' of fornication or divorces while preserving the unity of parents and their offspring as families.



Themes

The Role of Individuality in the State

The author begins the book by explaining that he means 'liberty' as civil liberties. The individual in relation to the laws and customs of the land are the concern of his treatise. His reason for making this clear is because there are other ways to address the matter of 'liberty'.

He first explores what individuality is within the context of being a person who is a member of society. Then he goes on to describe how the behavior of an individual relates to the laws of a given land, in this case England. He differentiates between the conscience and the totality of an individual.

He next goes onto to discuss human liberty, beyond any legal sense, but still within the context of society. When he does this, it naturally leads to something else. The author is now comparing the behavior to the laws of the land. He now discourses on the relation of the individual's right of free action and difficulties pertaining to criminal behavior. He writes about how the state shall find its limits. He informs readers that on one side it is imperative not to restrict the free actions of an individual within human society whilst on the other it is important to prevent and otherwise thwart crimes, especially those that harm others the worse in degree the more important that they be stopped. This is the other side of the role of the legal system as it pertains to guarding the civil liberties of the group of members of society rather than failing to protect the members for fear of encroachment upon the rights of its own citizens. Oppression of an invasive nature is one error, its opposite error is obviously that of negligence. He says that he thinks that coercion is wrong, but does not address questions about whether or not this is the result of his own disposition or upbringing or whether it is a more universal truth.

The Value of Dissent & Discourse

The author writes this entire book from the foundation of valuing the expression of views. One portion of the whole endeavor is for him put forth his own views on the subject for the purpose of engaging in what in the 1850s is public debate within English society. As an intellectual he is in an advantageous position for sharing this with others thanks to his relatively high rank in society.

He specifically brings up the matter of opinion and of sharing differing ones. He states in no uncertain terms that he thinks it is morally superior that every individual member of society have his or her own view- at least once mature enough to formulate one, and to be free to safely express this. He does state that he feels strongly that limitations need to be placed on actions but that the expression of views is something that benefits individuals and the whole society.



JS Mill explains that there are two reasons for sharing views. One is to create the opportunity for correction and the other is to come to the truth another way. It is notably peculiar that people must feel safe enough to expose themselves in this way. For this reason, the author recommends that people not attack an alternative opinion but late in the book he directly confronts the fact that this is not always easy to do. Earlier in the book during the first two or three chapters, he explains that often enough when someone shares an opinion this creates the opportunity to find out whether or not what has been told is true or false or sometimes true. In the case that everyone who added to the discussion was harboring some fraction of the truth then the entire group has the opportunity to enlarge their own frames of reference or to alter their thinking into something that has the capacity to sustain these various events. Another reason is that some will learn that they were wrong, others that they were correct. Some will discover more than anything else how argumentative they are and how aggressive they are to rush to the support of their own opinions.

The growth of the state, and the political policies that sustain individual members of society are controlled by a mixture of the truth and opinions rooted in combinations of truth with ideological predilections. These matters, the author insists, are greatly benefited by public discourse and the cultivation of the ability of everyone in England to think for themselves and to participate in the exchange of views.

English Politics

Politics in England at the time that the book came out is most certainly a major theme of this work. To the extent that it is educational it is so largely because the author wishes to include his fellow men and women of England to participate to the extent possible with the society and the government's politics as citizens.

In order to facilitate this he makes sweeping gestures which effectively introduce innocent or ignorant readers to large areas of politics at once. The importance of the individual's rights and appropriate limits are examined. This is one significant matter regarding personal civil liberty within the context of England and English law.

The author discusses the politics of public trading. The simple truth of the market place is one of the many features of daily life that transforms into a complex matter once taken to the level of politics and mass numbers. He tells readers about some basic policies such as free trade and intimates how these relate to their experience with the competition within the retail world as they find it 'on the street'.

Later, after some sense of private laws pertaining to crime and social safety and then merchant trading have been covered, the author John Stuart Mill goes on into taxation of other commodities. He pursues this subject for some time, ever with the instructive approach which allows readers to learn without being offended.

Further, he swashes over the laws concerning the additional matter of education for the masses of the population. At the time of his writing the world and lifestyle of massive



education provided through the state was not an established system. Home schooling, which has become a growing choice amongst 21st century Americans was the only option for a large portion of the English populace. The institutions of education that followed this period enabled the systematic eradication of levels of ignorance for masses of citizens-to-be as powerfully as the success of indoor plumbing and harnessed, safe, electricity made the quality of life within a home far higher in some respects than it had ever been before. This matter like all others could be debated, and those who claim that something else was lost are probably correct. Nonetheless, a massive change in the culture took place. JS Mill writes as an advocate of this whole idea of 'education for all' and that all includes women and girls.

Style

Perspective

The author's perspective is that of Victorian England. He was raised into a rather prominent family with some very strong values. England was feeling the influence of Jeremy Bentham who was a major player in a reform movement of liberalism within England.

He writes the book with what is a limited form of objectivity. He is objective in that he is writing about truth and knowledge rather than about preferences and opinions. The tone is somewhat objective. The reason it is limited is that he is self-aware that he is writing from a contextualized situation. Further, while it is the truth he is most interested in he also realizes that he is writing from a particular ideological, political and social standpoint and that his view is not the only one that can functionally exist. He is however, quite concerned with which one is the best. As such, the perspective includes the subjectivity of his individual expression and 'personal truth' along with this middle ground of socio-political possibilities as well as having the objective object of truth and ethical accuracy and honor as the moral object of the entire venture.

Tone

The writer's intention is to be instructive and engaging. He performs a bit of a marvel in that he manages to give the readers the feeling of being included in a conversation despite the fact that being a book, the presentation is of course a monologue. However, this may in part be a beneficial side effect of the fact that he writes the book in a response to the environment of the time. During the time, the ideas which he discusses were all well known politically and as such readers would be prone to feeling the pleasure of this and the sense of 'interactivity' in the writing.

The book has been used as a textbook in many universities for well over a century. While the author did intend to be instructive in his tone, it is debatable whether or not he meant for this book to become a classic of modern philosophy or political science. The editors work at the book's forefront are what indicate for readers that now that it is nearly 150 years old, it is being used for higher education.

The author does not remove his personal views from this material, but he does not share them in the manner of subjective attitude or perspective.

Structure

The book is divided very simply. There is the work that the editor has done. This takes place to serve the educational market due to the book's success within university

departments. The prefaces and the like are useful even to the casual reader, for the same reasons that they are helpful for students.

After that the comes the main body of the text. This itself is organized into five very simple chapters. However, the Penguin edition does not set the chapter titles out in the table of context. Needless to say, even if a given reader comes into an edition that does not match the one used to create this summary, pagination and very minor details will be the only differences with respect to the content.

The five chapters follow a simple enough order of progression. It may seem that the beginning and the endpoint are very much the same but they are not due to the process that readers will have borne witness to during their mental journey through the text. At the beginning there is little information other than what has been offered by the cover and the editors or in the case of students perhaps some professors. By the end, one can see for himself or herself how the author has related the individuality and character to the functions of the government. This is political viewpoint with explanation of its practice on one level. On another level, this is some explication of the method that can be used to convert philosophical principles into practice.



Quotes

"If the government would make up its mind to require a good education for every child, it might save itself the trouble of providing one." [emphasis removed] p. 119

"...but the clergy." p. 46

"Socrates was put to the death, but the Socratic philosophy rose to heaven like the sun in heaven, and spread its illumination over the whole intellectual firmament." p. 39

"...the narrow circles of thinking and studious persons." p. 39

"The same thing holds true, generally speaking, of all traditional doctrines- those of prudence and knowledge of life, as well as of morals and religion." p.50

"Is it necessary that some part of humanity should persist in error, to enable any to realize the truth?" p. 51

"...the consolidation of opinion; a consolidation as salutary in the case, as it is dangerous and noxious when the opinions are erroneous." p. 51

"...to prohibit any number of things which it admits to be innocent." p. 100

"It invades my right of equality by deriving a profit from the creation of a misery that I am taxed to support." p. 101

"...only when the means of success have been employed which it is contrary to the general interest to permit- namely, fraud, or treachery, and force." p. 107

"There are arguments on both sides." p. 112

"There is considerable force in these arguments." p. 113

"To tax stimulants for the sole purpose of making them more difficult to be obtained, is a measure of differing only in degree from their entire prohibition; and would be justifiable only if that were justifiable." p. 113

"A further question is, whether the State, while it permits, should nevertheless discourage conduct which it deems contrary to the best interests of the agent." p. 113

Topics for Discussion

Do you think that John Stuart Mill's success was dependent upon the social position of his father? Explain the extent to which you feel this to be true with defenses for your answer.

Do you think that *On Liberty* provides readers with principles that can be applied to contemporary society, in the reader's own culture? Explain why you agree or disagree.

Discuss your view on free trade. Compare how it appears in the book *On Liberty* with how it is in the society in which you actually live.

Do you think the fact that JS Mill's book is about England makes it irrelevant to contemporary non-English readers? Explain your answer.

Do you agree with JS Mill that individuals should be free to speak their own opinions?

Do you think that JS Mill is correct that when people disagree and share their views that this can correct error and help all those involved to learn the truth?

Compare the US today with JS Mill's assessment of 1859 that a strength of American citizens is the ability to self-govern to such an extreme that 'left with no government' they would form one and proceed with life. Show that this is still true, or explain why this has changed.

Do you think JS Mill is right that crime can be prevented by noticing when someone is preparing to commit one? Explain your answer.

Do you think that JS Mill goes into the right amount of detail about political structures in chapter 5? Why or why not?

Do you think this book elucidates the meaning of civil liberties? Defend your answer.

Do you agree or disagree with JS Mill's assertion that aside from lovely paintings and the odd book, people in general are easily disturbed by true genius? Explain your answer.