On Liberty

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill was the oldest of James and Harriet Mill's nine children. James Mill was passionate about the ethical theory of utilitarianism and raised John to be the next leader of the movement. To that end, James took firm control of John's education—Mill was secluded from other children his age (other than his siblings) and began learning classical languages when he was three years old before moving onto useful subjects such as arithmetic, science, philosophy, and politics. Mill's childhood was so unusual that as an adult he had a minor breakdown and began questioning whether any of his education was useful because it didn't prepare him for a successful social life. Fortunately, John found happiness in reading poetry and was able to overcome his depression. Mill began his professional life as an administrator for the British East India Company from 1823 until 1858. When he was in his 20s, John met Harriet Taylor and quickly fell in love with her. Although she was already married, John and Harriet maintained a healthy platonic relationship until her husband's death in 1849 and their marriage in 1851. Harriet played a significant role in helping John write his essays and speeches—he even credits her as something of a co-author in the beginning of *On Liberty*. Unfortunately, Harriet died while they were travelling in France in 1858. Heartbroken, Mill bought a house in France near where Harriet was buried and split his time between there and England. Mill served as a Member of Parliament for Westminster from 1865 to 1868 and continued writing about and sharing his ideas of liberty, utilitarianism, and women's rights until his death in Avignon, France in 1873.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Mill was born in the early years of the 19th century, shortly after the French and American Revolutions. In both of these historical periods, the masses revolted against tyrannical powers that limited their individual liberties and rights. Mill himself echoes many of the sentiments expressed by the Enlightenment political philosophers whose works helped inspire these revolutions, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. In Mill's own lifetime, the American Civil War fueled debates about slavery, equality, and the power one individual should be able to exert over another. Mill himself believed that one should be allowed safely pursue one's definition of happiness as long as it doesn't infringe upon the liberty or well-being of any other individual, which indicates his anti-slavery beliefs. During Mill's lifetime, the East India Company and British Imperialism began dominating the globe through colonization and trade, introducing Mill and other English men and women to different cultures and beliefs that were presented as inferior and barbaric. Despite Mill's anti-slavery views, his experience with these other cultures led him to develop the belief that "savages" (people who don't belong to "civilized" cultures) actually do need to be controlled until they develop the intelligence and ability to adequately govern themselves by Western standards. Additionally, Mill witnessed the rise of women's suffrage in both Europe and America, although the movement didn't become widely popular until much later in his life.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Mill was an adamant utilitarian, which is reflected in how he advocates for individual liberty as a means of being more useful in *On Liberty*. Mill's other book *Utilitarianism* provides a more in-depth view of Mill's philosophy and its major tenets. In *On Liberty*, Mill dwells on what the relationship between the individual and the government should be, namely that the government should play only a limited role in an individual's life. Jean-Jacques Rousseau shares similar sentiments in his Enlightenment era political essay *The Social Contract*. For a contrary view—that rulers should play a strong role in the day-to-day lives of citizens—Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* advocates for an extremely powerful sovereign to strongly enforce the law in the state. Mill believes that society can be as tyrannical as the government, primarily by condemning those who don't adhere to custom and popular opinion. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels argue that a state's economic system can also be tyrannical by keeping the working classes in a position of inferiority and crippling poverty. For a more modern take on the ideal relationship between a state's government and its people, Robert Nozick's 1974 book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, supports the idea of minimal government interference in individual lives except to punish crimes that hurt other people.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** On Liberty
- **When Written:** 1854-1859
- **Where Written:** England and France
- **When Published:** 1859
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Political Essay
- **Antagonist:** Social and Political Tyranny
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Ladies' Man. Thanks in part to his relationship with Harriet Taylor, Mill passionately supported women's rights in essays and speeches, which was unusual for a man in the Victorian Era. In fact, he became the first member of Parliament to introduce a major petition for women's suffrage in June 1866. This led to the first debate over whether to give women the right to vote, but Parliament did not pass the bill.

Brainiac. Mill's childhood education was undoubtedly odd, but it produced some amazing results. Mill began learning Greek when he was just three years old and was fluent in both Greek and Latin by 10 years old. His father even put him in charge of teaching both languages to his younger siblings.

PLOT SUMMARY

Plot Summary

John Stuart Mill explains that he wants to explore the question of how much power a society or government can rightly exert over individual lives. From time immemorial, human civilization has been characterized by the struggle between individual liberty and authority, culminating in the idea that liberty really means freedom and protection from tyranny or oppression. Historically, the result was that some groups (including Americans) established representative governments with elected leaders that hold temporary positions and can be removed from office if society wills it.

However, tyranny isn't just political—it can be social as well. When a government represents the will of the people, it actually only represents the will of the majority, which is imposed on all members of society regardless of whether it reflects their individual wills or not. This is called the tyranny of the majority and it can be applied to social situations, too. When the majority of a society holds certain opinions about individual conduct and acceptable behavior, it has its own ways of punishing those who go against it. Because of this possibility, society must determine how much public opinion should influence individual liberty and then actively protect itself from the potentially overbearing power of public opinion. It is necessary to establish rules that prohibit actions that might encroach upon the liberty of other people; however, neither government nor society has the authority to determine what people can or cannot do if their actions only affect themselves.

The government is right to interfere in individual lives if doing so is in the best interest of society in general. This means that the government—or society—can interfere if the actions of an individual either harm or risk harming other people in some way. When it comes to individual conduct, however, people have absolute control over their decisions and actions (only so long as they don't infringe on someone else's rights, that is). Furthermore, this control only applies to reasonable adults, not minors. Mill writes that individual liberty means that all people have a right to form and share their personal opinions and thoughts, to choose their own paths in life, and to congregate with other people for any reason other than to do harm to someone else. Society, however, tries to control individual liberty and individuality by compelling people to conform to popular opinion, either through legislation or by propagating negative opinions about those who don't conform. Mill acknowledges that the full question of liberty is broad, and so he will limit the topics he explores to individual liberty—individuality of thought or action, as well as the power society has (or should have) over individual lives.

Mill asserts that the time for debating the necessity of the freedom of the press is past (or at least he hopes it is) and instead turns his attention to how people form their own opinions—or don't, if they feel they must adopt prevailing opinions. Mill writes that society tries to silence unpopular opinions to protect the status quo, but actually risks hurting itself in the process. When society silences an opinion, it robs itself of the opportunity to discuss a new idea that might actually be true and help society improve itself. On the other hand, if this opinion is *not* true, then silencing it prevents society from discussing why it's a false opinion and how this discovery supports the truth of other opinions. More importantly, free discussion on diverse opinions is necessary to a society's health because it helps prevent it from adhering to opinions and customs mechanically instead of truly understanding them. This includes being open to hearing criticism of accepted opinions, which helps people discover hidden truths that can improve their lives. Mill believes it is one of humanity's chief virtues that people are capable of changing and adapting when a better mode of living is presented to them, but even this can only be achieved if people are free to discuss their mistakes, gain firsthand experience with them, and hear arguments in favor of diverging opinions. Additionally, frequent discussion and even argument over an opinion's truth is vital to keeping the meaning of that opinion alive in people's minds.

Even though having a diversity of opinions and the freedom to discuss them is so beneficial to society, people in the modern day are still penalized for harboring opinions that oppose the majority's opinion. These penalties are not as harsh as they used to be—nobody is executed for having a divergent opinion—but Mill worries that they might get worse due to religion's surging popularity in English society. When someone determines that an opinion is immoral, for example, the person who holds the opinion might face social stigma or even legal punishment for it. Unfortunately, this kind of punishment creates an environment that is not conducive to true mental freedom, as more and more people stifle their own thoughts out of fear that they might develop a heretical one. This fear in

turn prevents individuals from sharing differing opinions that might contain a kernel of truth that, combined with accepted opinions, could benefit society in general. Ultimately, Mill rejects the idea that legal restraints should be placed on discussing opinions, although public opinion itself might condemn someone for being malicious in the way they share their opinions.

After establishing that the freedom to form, express, and discuss opinions is important to a society's health, Mill turns his argument to the value of individuality. Mill believes that the real threat to individuality is that people are generally indifferent towards it—they simply don't understand its value to personal and public happiness. At worst, people see individuality as a social evil that might upset the established order. At the same time, nobody believes that people should just blindly conform to the customs that dictate acceptable social behavior and growth. Mill believes that individuality is a key part of human nature while conformity goes against nature. When people blindly conform to custom, they stop thinking; when they stop thinking, people gradually lose the ability to think for themselves at all.

While past civilization struggled to get people to control their individuality enough to follow social rules, modern civilization faces the opposite problem—trying to get people to throw off the yoke of custom and embrace their individuality. It simply doesn't occur to a lot of people to think for themselves or follow their natural impulses, and in these conditions much of what makes a person human—energy, originality, independent thought, and so on—risks dying out from neglect. More importantly, individuality is closely linked to originality, which is a necessary element of social progress and establishing new opinions and practices. Mill explains that nobody would argue this point in theory, but more often than not they do oppose it in practice because they struggle to understand it. Instead of originality, mediocrity has gained supremacy in modern society. However, this means that there is a greater need of originality than ever, and Mill encourages readers to embrace their eccentricity and originality rather than suppressing it to keep the peace in society.

Mill addresses the question of how much authority society should have over individual lives. He maintains that all people should be free to do whatever they want so long as their actions don't hurt anyone else, but he also points out that choosing to engage in activities or actions that are obnoxious to others will result in natural consequences. For example, people will choose to avoid—and warn others to avoid—people whose conduct is generally offensive, even if it's not illegal. In this way, society penalizes people for consciously making poor choices, but Mill also argues that society is right in punishing people for infringing on others' rights through deception or taking advantage of them. Furthermore, even if a person doesn't directly harm another, they can be penalized for how their actions indirectly harm other individuals or society in general, such as when a person gambles away their money instead of paying their debts or taking care of their family. In these cases, however, it's important to differentiate between penalizing someone for the harm their actions cause others rather than for the action itself (after all, spending money is not in itself immoral; it only becomes so when it negatively affects someone else). In cases where an individual's conduct hurts nobody but themselves—no matter how unpleasant it may be—society has absolutely no right to interfere with or penalize them.

Mill offers to illustrate various applications of the principles of liberty and individuality that he's been exploring in order to help readers determine how they might actually be applied in real life. He states that his general doctrine can be summed up in two maxims: that individuals are only accountable to society for their actions that affect other people, and that the individual might be punished by society for harming others. However, society isn't always justified in interfering on behalf of an injured party—for instance, people are frequently injured by losing a job promotion or a competition, but that doesn't mean the person who won these things should be punished, unless they used malicious means to win.

Trade is a useful field to apply Mill's concepts to—it is a social act and therefore falls under society's jurisdiction, but it also involves the individual liberty of the buyer to a large extent. To explore the power society should have over trade, Mill zeroes in on the sale of poisons. A buyer might be buying a poison for a legitimate reason, but there is always the risk that they will commit a murder with it. Because poison has legal uses, the government should not outright prohibit its sale, but it would be justified in making it more difficult to obtain by requiring sellers to keep careful records of who buys it and when. This is no problem for people who are buying poison for legal reasons, but it might dissuade people who want to commit a murder with poison, because it leaves a paper trail that could be used to indict them for the crime. Similarly, giving advice is a social act, but one which society shouldn't constrain because it still protected by individual liberty and promotes individual welfare—people should be free to share advice, discuss opinions, or help each other decide on courses of action. The only time giving advice might rightfully be subject to social interference is when the person giving advice is deriving some malicious or selfish benefit (possibly financial benefit) from doing so. Furthermore, one person should not be allowed to have too much freedom over another, as in the case of slavery or even **marriage**. In general, the greatest possible amount of liberty should be given to people to enjoy a diversity of opinions, discussion, opportunities, beliefs, and even educations, because these things promote progress even if they challenge the social unity that comes from forced conformity to public opinion. Mill believes that a society which forces conformity on all its citizens dwarfs itself and hinders its

collective ability to achieve greatness, because a state's worth and potential are directly proportional to the strength, individuality, originality, and intelligence of the individual people who make it up.

CHARACTERS

John Stuart Mill – The author and narrator of *On Liberty*. Mill was one of the most influential political and philosophical thinkers of the 19th century as well as the Member of Parliament for Westminster and a prolific author, writing dozens of essays and giving numerous lectures in his lifetime. In *On Liberty*, Mill shares his opinions on the importance of liberty and what the biggest threats are to individual liberty. Mill believes that individual liberty is sacred and must be protected from those who threaten it, either socially or politically through his concept of tyranny of the majority—when those who are (or are perceived to be) the majority forcibly impose laws, social customs, and other restrictive rules on the minority. Although Mill believes that liberty is a sacred right belonging to all people, he also believes that there should be some limitations that protect vulnerable people and prevent one person from infringing upon another's rights. *On Liberty* argues for each person's right to pursue happiness as long as it doesn't harm others, an idea based in Mill's belief in utilitarian theory, which essentially advocates for an ethical system that holds the promotion of happiness as its highest moral ideal.

TERMS

Tyranny of the majority – **Mill** believes that there are two major forms of tyranny: political tyranny (as when a political leader takes too much control over individual lives of the citizens of the state) and social tyranny, which he calls "tyranny of the majority." Mill admits that even when the political leaders of a state allow its citizens the right amount of individual liberty, society can still become a tyrant over itself. Mill explains, "The will of the people [...] practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people," which emphasizes the fact that the actions of even the most democratic government only reflect the "will" of the politically active citizens, while those in the minority are forced to abide by these decisions. This illustrates the political element of the tyranny of the majority. Furthermore, the tyranny of the majority extends beyond politics—society, according to Mill, punishes its members for breeching custom or violating the opinions and beliefs of the majority (or at least those recognized as the majority), making it more insidious and difficult to protect oneself against than political oppression. Socially speaking, the tyranny of the majority forces people to conform to general expectation rather than freely and naturally developing one's individuality, which Mill believes is the most serious crime committed by society against individuals. According to Mill, it is vital for society to define the limits that public opinion should have over individual lives so it can, in essence, protect itself *from* itself by preventing the tyranny of the majority.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LIBERTY AND AUTHORITY

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* is one of the most important works of 19th-century Western political philosophy. Written less than a century after the American and French Revolutions—both of which sent shockwaves through Western civilization and inspired numerous political essays, pamphlets, and articles—*On Liberty* is a powerful argument in favor of individual liberty over governmental power. In particular, Mill explores the importance of "Civil, or Social Liberty" and "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual." Unfortunately, the threat of tyranny—either political or social—is ever-present, and debates over how much power a government should rightfully exercise over a state are as prevalent today as they were in Mill's lifetime. In *On Liberty*, Mill describes what he believes is the ideal relationship between individual liberty and authority in a modern nation: the ideal government has limited power over the individuals that make up its society, and society itself tends to thrive under a government that allows it the greatest possible freedom.

Mill argues that there are three basic rights that all men and women have if they enjoy true liberty in their society. The first is that all people are perfectly free in "the inward domain of consciousness." By this Mill means that people are able to form their own thoughts and share those thoughts with others; in other words, they enjoy the freedom of thought and of speech. The second is the "liberty of tastes and pursuits," meaning that people are free to pursue happiness in their own lives in whatever way works best for them. The exception to this is if one individual's actions will negatively affect another individual's wellbeing and liberty. The final basic right necessary for true freedom is the ability "to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to others." In other words, people within a society must be free to congregate for innocent purposes, such as church, social clubs, and even protests. But just as the "liberty of tastes and pursuits" carried an

exception—people's actions can't infringe on other people's wellbeing and liberty—the key here is that such gathering must not be malicious in nature and must not negatively impact other people. If people are congregating with the intention of hurting or limiting the basic rights of any other individual or group, this does not count as a basic right that's essential for true freedom.

Mill argues that the biggest threat to liberty in Western civilization's past and present is authority. The danger authority poses to liberty is that it can quickly devolve into tyranny if whoever holds authority abuses their power. So, throughout history, when people called and fought for liberty, they "meant protection against the tyranny of the political rulers." However, Mill also argues that "All that makes existence valuable to any one, depends on the enforcement of restraints upon the actions of other people." In other words, there must be some form of authority to both establish and maintain order so that the members of a society can enjoy liberty without being victimized by fellow citizens. For many, the solution to the problem of tyranny was to create a government of "elective and temporary rulers." Under this practice, rulers are not granted authority based on their birth or wealth but through elections, which implies that *anyone* can become the political leader of a society. Furthermore, the position is not lifelong but short-term, thus reducing the likelihood of lawful authority becoming unlawful tyranny.

Although Mill stresses the importance of individual liberty throughout his essay, he also makes it clear that individual liberty must have its limits, and that a nation's authority figures must enforce those limits. Though it may sound paradoxical, the right restrictions on individual liberty actually promotes and protects that liberty. Mill believes that "The only freedom which deserves the name, is that of pursuing our own good in our own way," meaning individuals should be free to do whatever it takes to create a happy life for themselves. Because of this, a just government should never impose restrictions or obstacles that limit it citizens' ability to do that. In other words, "the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself." By this Mill means that one is justified in doing whatever it takes to attain happiness *unless* it means doing some harm to another person or limiting another's ability to pursue their personal happiness in his or her own way. Those in authority over a state are responsible for enforcing the rules and conditions that ensure the greatest amount of liberty to all its citizens, which means that citizens occasionally have to answer to society when they make decisions that infringe on the rights and liberties of others. Ultimately, however, Mill suggests that "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign."

INDIVIDUALITY VS. CONFORMITY

One of John Stuart Mill's most powerful arguments in his popular essay *On Liberty* is that individuality must be protected and nurtured if a nation is to be successful and thrive. Although a nation's individual men and women are bound together by being members of the same society, it is important that they also know the importance of individuality—not just for their own personal happiness, but for the success of the entire community. In fact, Mill doubts that any state *can* succeed if its citizens do not harbor a strong sense of individuality alongside their collective identity as a community. In *On Liberty*, Mill provides a compelling argument about the importance of individuality in a successful society's development. He highlights that individuality goes hand in hand with diversity—of thought, belief, opinion, perspective, and so on—which is the key to improvement and progress.

Mill acknowledges that, for most of his audience, embracing individuality can be scary because it often means going against the social grain. However, he urges his audience to recognize that embracing their individuality actually benefits the same society that might initially condemn it. Mill argues that it is through cultivating a strong sense of individuality that "human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation." By this logic, without individuality, human beings lack many of the virtues (including nobility) they claim to value. Mill also considers individuality a form of resistance and asserts that if "resistance waits till life is reduced *nearly* to one uniform type, all deviations [...] will come to be considered impious, immoral, even monstrous." By this Mill means that if one waits too long to assert their individuality, it will be too late, and society's collective opinion will be such that all forms of individuality are immediately condemned. Mill writes, "Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable [...] that people should be eccentric" (by "eccentricity," Mill means "individuality"). With this, Mill suggests that society is not beyond saving, and embracing one's individuality could be the "reproach" that others need to start shaking off the chains of social tyranny.

While embracing individuality in a society that insists on total and unquestioning conformity is difficult, Mill points out that it is made even more difficult by the fact that the State also supports social conformity through its education system. Mill describes a "general State education" as a "mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another." This means that from a young age, people are taught to think and act in ways that those who define socially acceptable behavior—the upper classes and politicians—want them to. Because of this, "There have been [...] great individual thinkers, in a general atmosphere of mental slavery." Because of the "atmosphere of mental slavery," Mill explains, "these "great [...] thinkers" aren't free to reach their full potential and, by extension, neither is society. Students are pushed through a machine that "mould[s]"

them into something acceptable, but "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model and set to do the work prescribed for it." Individuality *is* human nature, but society forces people to stifle it in favor of total conformity.

Even though total conformity within a society seems favorable because it creates unity and unity breeds strength, it also eliminates individuality, which is at the root of diversity of thought and thus innovativeness and progress. Therefore, a lack of individuality within a society hinders its progress. Mill states that "The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it." Conformity demands limitations on individuals, so a society in which conformity reigns supreme will not be "worth" as much as one that encourages individuals to fully develop their unique natural abilities. Furthermore, Mill explains that "a State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments [...] will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished." In other words, by forcing conformity through both social and political tyranny, a state ruins its own chances at ever becoming truly great.

Mill places a high value on individuality because it brings both personal fulfillment and helps promote the good of the entire nation. Unfortunately, individuality is a threat to a society's prevailing powers—the political and upper classes—and their desire to maintain control. Unlimited individuality leads to diversity of thought, which makes it harder for those in power to "establish[] a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body." In other words, individuality is integral to liberty, which is a key component of a successful society.

SOCIAL TYRANNY AND CUSTOM

John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* primarily deals with the relationship between individual liberty and authority—but not just political authority. Mill believes that social prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and general resistance to change can be even more dangerous to individual liberty than corrupt political tyrants and restrictive laws. Through social tyranny (or the "tyranny of the majority"), individual men and women are told what is socially acceptable to do and say at different times and in different places. These prescribed formulas for behavior and speech are called customs, and changing a social custom is immensely difficult. In *On Liberty*, Mill examines the role social tyranny and custom have in hindering a society's collective ability to move forward and improve itself.

When one thinks of a tyrant, the image that comes to mind is usually one person in charge of an entire nation or state. However, Mill believes that society itself can be a tyrant. Most people—especially Mill's 19th-century audience—fear social stigma and ostracization, and so individual men and women are often all too willing to conform to the expectations and customs of their society. Because of this, Mill explains, society can be "the tyrant—society collectively, over the separate individuals who compose it." Moreover, "social tyranny [can be] more formidable than many kinds of political oppression." When one is trapped in a politically oppressive environment, one can at least turn to like-minded neighbors and friends for comfort and to vent; however, there are fewer chances to escape from social tyranny because it is inflicted *on* society, *by* society.

Out of fear of social ostracization, many people simply adopt the social customs that dictate acceptable behavior. However, this comes at a price: because so many people blindly adhere to social customs in their everyday lives, they cease to think for themselves. Mill writes, "He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice." This means that those who act and say only what custom deems appropriate aren't taking an active role in their own lives. They are passively accepting their role, rather than taking the active step of making an informed choice about what to do. Mill reinforces this point when he says of people who simply adhere to custom, "Their thinking is done for them." This highlights how social tyranny uses customs to discourage most people from thinking for themselves because the few who *do* think have already provided the rest of society with acceptable answers and opinions. Perhaps more importantly, Mill points out that "Customs are made for customary circumstances." This means that customs are meant for average day-to-day events, but they don't help anyone who might face unique problems; therefore, those who put all their faith into social customs and comparatively little into individual thought will have a difficult time successfully navigating their personal problems or relationships.

Although social customs might be comfortable because so many people follow them, they threaten a society's ability to advance or better itself because so few people are willing to do or say anything that violate customs. Mill describes custom as "unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called [...] the spirit of liberty." Because of the stigma attached to those who violate custom, few people dare to share innovative ideas or plans that might help society better itself. The only way for a society to break away from the tyranny of custom is through "nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom." In other words, when individuals refuse to do as custom dictates, they help set a precedent that will inspire others to adopt their own individual methods and ideas as well. Above all, Mill advocates for "protection [...] against the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling." This can be achieved by encouraging rather than discouraging people to consciously challenge customs that go against their natural inclinations or beliefs.

People are frequently faced with an impossible choice: either adhere to social custom and avoid the consequences of going against the grain, or break with custom and be rejected by society. Social tyranny works by imposing strict customs and discouraging individuals from embracing any of their natural

talents or thoughts that go against the social grain. However, breaking with these customs—even when it means social ostracization—is the first step toward progress, which is why Mill encourages his readers to reject following any and all customs that aren't in keeping with their natural impulses.

MORALITY, NEW IDEAS, AND PROGRESS

Culturally speaking, morality and the formation of new ideas are more valuable to a society than things like money or gold—morality helps guide humankind's behavior and new ideas are necessary to progress on both the personal and national levels. However, as John Stuart Mill explains in *On Liberty*, there are always those who oppose change and thus new ideas and progress. Those in power—for example, the upper classes (using social influence) and political elites (political power)—determine and define the morality that all over classes are expected to follow. Those who don't abide by the predetermined morality are frowned upon and face the loss of whatever good reputation they have, and perhaps even total social ostracization. In Mill's essay, he argues that morality is changeable and that occasionally behaviors which are considered immoral by one generation are gladly accepted by the next. For instance, one generation might have strict rules about dating and say an unmarried woman can't spend any time with an unmarried man without a chaperone; however, the next generation might see no problem in an unmarried couple taking long walks alone together. This change in what constitutes socially-acceptable and moral behavior can be considered progress by Mill's definition because it affords greater liberty to individuals without hurting anyone else or infringing on their rights. However, for society to progress there must be a constant influx of new discussions on all of society's accepted customs and ideas (be they social, political, or economic), both old and new. Still, there are always those who oppose such discussions and changes in the name of traditional morality and values. However, as Mill ultimately argues, mankind's natural tendency toward progress through redefining morality and introducing innovative new ideas is powerful enough to overcome whatever obstacles the prevailing social and political powers can throw in its way.

New ideas often mean progress—a shedding of old traditions and stale beliefs in favor of newer, more modern ones. However, this turnover also means that those who enjoy power in one generation risk losing it with the next; therefore, there is often a tendency among powerful people to suppress new ideas. Mill writes that "Wherever there is an ascendant class, a large portion of the morality of the country emanates from its class interests." This means that whenever there is a group or class of people that are generally considered superior to others, the prevailing opinions about moral or immoral behavior of that society serves to support those in power somehow. Historically, those in power will go to great lengths to suppress ideas that threaten their total supremacy. Mill points out that "History teems with instances of truth put down by persecution"; in other words, when someone introduces a new idea that threatens the power of the ruling classes, they will fight back by persecuting—typically socially, through stripping people of their reputations—those who support the new idea. Unfortunately, the threat of persecution is enough to dissuade many people from sharing their ideas and beliefs. After all, as Mill asks, "Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any […] independent train of thought" out of fear of being stigmatized as "irreligious or immoral?"

In the face of immense criticism, it is understandable that many people would choose to keep their opinions under wraps. However, according to Mill, this impulse is far more dangerous than opening oneself up to potential persecution. Mill says, "Our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion." By this Mill means that while people in the modern day aren't physically punished for diverging from popular opinion, the social stigma that attaches itself to those who go against the grain is enough to deter people from expressing their opinions in the first place. Furthermore, "the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race." Because every opinion or new idea—no matter how different from prevailing ones—has the potential to positively influence society, "silencing" their expression means "robbing" one's fellow citizens of the opportunity to apply these new, beneficial ideas to their own lives. Mill also points out that "The greatest harm done is to those who are not heretics, and whose whole mental development is cramped […] by the fear of heresy." In other words, people internalize their fear of social stigma or persecution to the point where they limit their private thoughts to those which are in keeping with the prevailing morality.

Despite all of this, Mill believes that it is human nature to be drawn to progress and to want to improve upon the ideas that characterized the past. One of the distinguishing features of human beings is that they are "capable of rectifying [their] mistakes, by discussion and experience." People can and do make changes to how they live their lives for the better, but part of the reason they're able to do this is because they are free to openly discuss their opinions and ideas with others. Mill likens human behavior to "a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides," not just one or two acceptable sides. Society might place restrictions on individual people, but, like a tree, over time they will develop in whatever ways come naturally to them—the only question is whether they express this development externally or internalize it. Ultimately, the persecution of the new ideas that stimulate progress is never strong enough to stop change from happening, as shown by the

fact that humanity *has* changed and progressed over time.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

MARRIAGE

In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill uses 19th-century marriage to represent a toxic despotism in which one person (the husband) is given far too much power over others (the wife and, if they have them, children). Mill believes that every individual person, regardless of gender, deserves to have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else, the exceptions being if they are underage or not mentally capable of adequately taking care of themselves. In marriage, however, women are considered the property of their husbands and do not enjoy the same level of legal protection as men do. Because of this disparity, marriage is not an equitable relationship any more than people living under a despotic government are truly free. Mill sees this as one of Western society's great evils—one which needs to be altered if Western society will ever truly be able to call itself free. Mill even goes so far as to provide a solution: "nothing more is needed for the complete removal of the evil, than that wives should have the same rights, and should receive the protection of law in the same manner, as all other persons," which is admittedly easier said than done. Likewise, if a society is truly free then all citizens have the same rights and legal protections as everyone else. More importantly, the amount of power one person (be they a political leader or a husband) can exercise over another must be limited, and if this power is abused, then the subjects (either citizens or wives) have a right and even a duty to revolt against it in the name of personal liberty (through revolution or divorce).

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *On Liberty and The Subjugation of Women* published in 2006.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"What was now wanted was, that the rulers should be identified with the people; that their interest and will should be the interest and will of the nation. The nation did not need to be protected against its own will. There was no fear of its tyrannizing over itself. Let the rulers be effectually responsible to it, promptly removable by it, and it could afford to trust them with power of which it could itself dictate the use to be made. Their power was but the nation's own power, concentrated, and in a form convenient for exercise.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

Mill explains that at some point in history, people began rejecting the idea that power should be both hereditary and permanent. More importantly, they rejected the idea that those in power should exist in a world of their own with interests that might not reflect the interests of society. Society wanted leaders who "identified with the people," meaning leaders who were actually part of society and therefore understood its needs and desires. A leader with close personal ties to society would also share its interests, thus ending the historical pattern of leaders pursuing interests that were different from or even opposed to society's interests. Furthermore, this would mean society wouldn't need to protect itself against leaders because society doesn't "need to be protected against its own will."

When society chooses its own leaders, it enjoys a certain level of control over the state's power because the leader they choose must answer to society for all of the decisions they make. When they make bad choices, society has the option to exert their power and remove the leader from office in favor of someone who might do a better job. When a society chooses their leaders, it also helps bridge the gap that used to exist between a ruler and their subjects. There is a different level of trust and accountability that exists between an elected ruler and those who elected them, but even more so between an elected ruler and those who opposed their election. In the latter case, the ruler must prove that they will not oppress those who oppose them, but make decisions that benefit all people equally as far as that's possible.

> The 'people' who exercise the power are not always the same people with those over whom it is exercised; and the 'self-government' spoken of is not the government of each by himself, but of each by all the rest. The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority; the people, consequently, *may* desire to oppress a part of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When people first established representative systems of government, they did it with the best intentions and the firm belief that it was the best or even the only way to make sure the will of the people was the determining factor in the state's decisions. Mill, however, points out the fatal flaw in this thinking—the early creators of representative governments didn't fully comprehend the power of the majority when it comes to making decisions. Leaders have little choice but to follow the will of the majority; otherwise, the same majority can vote them out of office. However, this means forcing the will of the majority onto the minority, which could violate their rights. Notably, the majority might not actually be the majority—they might have just somehow "succeed[ed] in making themselves accepted as the majority" because they are more politically active than other groups.

The most dangerous part of this concept, however, is that it enables the majority to willfully oppress the minority. Because they're the majority, they can vote in support of laws that limit what the minority can or can't do. Furthermore, they can do this in the full confidence that their elected leaders—no matter their personal qualms—will follow through on what they're told because otherwise they risk losing their positions. This contradicts the earlier belief that society doesn't need to protect itself from itself.

> Society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practices a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, thought not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself. Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

Mill explains that tyranny is not solely a political phenomenon, but a social one as well. There are laws that people must follow, and they can be punished for violating them. There are also "mandates," or rules created by society that govern what is or is not socially acceptable behavior or topics of conversation. In some ways, this is okay because having rules of conduct can be a positive thing for society.

On the other hand, society is not restricted by the same rules as elected political leaders are, and the rules they create can foster a more oppressive environment than political oppression can; hence "social tyranny" can be "more formidable" than political tyranny. Although a person might not face the same outwardly "extreme" punishments for violating social mandates as they would for breaking laws, the ways society punishes dissenters is much more dangerous and insidious because it "leaves fewer means of escape." When a person is surrounded by society, it is far more difficult to get away from it. More importantly, society is uniquely capable of getting into a person's head rather quickly. This enables it to "enslav[e] the soul itself" by making people feel like they must limit their thoughts as well as their actions.

Because society is so powerful and capable of hindering individual development—this is done by making people afraid that they will lose their reputation if they don't conform to society's opinions—it must protect itself from its own tendency to domineer over all individuals. Although

those currently at the top of the social food chain might disagree because the current system benefits them, there is never any certainty that those who lead society today will still lead it tomorrow. Therefore, it is in everyone's best interest to limit the power of society over individuals.

> The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

Mill strongly believes in the necessity of individual freedom for both national prosperity and personal well-being. This means that people should be free to do whatever they want and forge their own paths in life to attain happiness, but only as long as their actions don't infringe on the rights or abilities of others to do the same. For this reason, individuals must answer to society when their conduct "concerns others." This might mean they hurt another person, neglected to help another person, or even just lied to someone else because by doing so they deprive that person of their right to the truth. Although all people should be free, nobody should be free to limit the freedom of another person unless that person has already violated the rules and must therefore be punished.

Mill writes that individuals are "sovereign" over their "own body and mind." This means that people get to choose what actions they do or, perhaps more importantly, do *not* do. However, liberty must also extend to a person's thoughts. They must never be forced to become so subservient to another that they no longer think for themselves or form their own opinions. Any violation of these things is an exercise of illegitimate power and should be both condemned and punished by society.

> This, then, is the appropriate region of human liberty. It comprises, first, the inward domain of consciousness; demanding liberty of thought and feeling; absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological. The liberty of expressing and publishing opinions may seem to fall under a different principle, since it belongs to that part of the conduct of any individual which concerns other people; but, being almost of as much importance as the liberty of thought itself, [...] is practically inseparable from it. Secondly, the principle requires liberty of tastes and pursuits; of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character; of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow: without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong. Thirdly, from this liberty of each individual, follows the liberty, within the same limits, of combination among individuals; freedom to unite, for any purpose not involving harm to other: the persons combining being supposed to be of full age and not forced or deceived.
>
> No society in which these liberties are not [...] respected is free, whatever may be its form of government[.]

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Page Number: 18-19

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mill shares what he believes are the three main components of individual liberty. Notably, people must be free to form their own opinions *and* to share those opinions without fear of being punished by either the government or society. Furthermore, there is no branch of knowledge which a person can rightly be prohibited from forming their own opinions on. This includes "theological" subjects, which were highly contentious in Mill's lifetime and remain controversial in today's world.

The liberty of "tastes and pursuits" means that people must be free to determine their own paths in life. In this context, "tastes" also means inclinations, which society generally disapproves of if they diverge from socially acceptable inclinations. This is something Mill talks about later in his essay. However, in all manner of decisions, people are "subject to such consequences as may follow," which means individuals must accept whatever consequences—good or bad, intended or unintended—result from their choices.

Mill also discusses people who are "of full age," meaning people who have reached what society legally considers adulthood since minors must have many of their decisions made for them by capable adults until they're mature and smart enough to make reasonable decisions for themselves.

These people, Mill argues, should be free to unite with others. This would include the formation of clubs or unions, so long as their ultimate goal isn't to harm another group or person. Even if a country enjoys a functioning democracy, it can't call itself free without these basic rights.

Chapter 2 Quotes

Let us suppose, therefore, that the government is entirely at one with the people, and never thinks of exerting any power of coercion unless in agreement with what it conceives to be their voice. But I deny the right of the people to exercise such coercion, either by themselves or by their government. The power itself is illegitimate. The best government has no more title to it than the worst. It is as noxious, or more noxious, when exerted in accordance with public opinion than when in opposition to it. 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. [...] But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

Mill provides further details on his belief that any power which infringes on individual liberty—either social or political powers—is illegitimate. This also means that the power can (and should) be taken away from whoever is abusing it. When Mill says, "The best government has no more title to it than the worst," he means that not even the best or most successful systems of government have a right to compel people into a course of action (except to punish them for violating other people's rights), even if it's for that individual's own good. If a government does this "in accordance with public opinion," it means that the government itself is somewhat subservient to public opinion, which highlights Mill's belief in the overwhelming power of social tyranny.

Mill adamantly opposes the idea that the majority of a society has any right to oppress the minority, even if it's just a minority of one. This is because even one individual's rights should be protected at all costs. After all, if society can strip away one person's rights and oppress them, what is stopping society from doing it to more and more people? The rights of individuals must be taken as seriously as the rights of the majority for a society to not only survive but thrive and succeed. Furthermore, silencing opinion prevents society from learning from it, even if only one or two people hold it. Mill believes nearly all opinions hold a kernel of truth, and so it's important to take them all seriously and discuss them freely in order to learn from them.

First: the opinion which it is attempted to suppress by authority may possibly be true. Those who desire to suppress it, of course deny its truth; but they are not infallible. They have no authority to decide the question for all mankind, and exclude every other person from the means of judging. To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure that it is false, is to assume that *their* certainty is the same thing as *absolute* certainty. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility. Its condemnation may be allowed to rest on this common argument, not the worse for being common.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Mill explains some of the reasons why all opinions have merit and should carry weight within society. Nobody initially knows which opinions will prove true or false, so it is important not to silence or condemn any of them too quickly. Instead, they should be discussed, debated, and shared with as many people as possible. Even elected leaders don't have the right to decide the answer of a moral question or the validity of a proposed truth for the rest of society. These decisions fall within the domain of personal liberty, and so hearing about different opinions is as much a personal right as sharing them.

The real danger in any assumption of infallibility, no matter how seemingly minor, is that it implies infallibility on more important topics. Nobody should ever just assume that they are right and incapable of being wrong—they don't learn, they don't improve, and they potentially limit the inner growth of those around them, as well. This is why Mill

condemns the practice of refusing to let opinions be shared throughout society. The fact that it is a "common argument" means that Mill believes most people would agree with him, at least in theory if not always in practice.

> He is capable of rectifying his mistakes, by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone. There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it. Very few facts are able to tell their own story, without comments to bring out their meaning.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

Mill believes that one of humanity's chief merits is that people are "capable of rectifying [their] mistakes." This means they are capable of changing their ways and doing better once they see the way and means to do it. A lot of people learn this through experience—they make a mistake, suffer the consequences, and then avoid making the same mistake in future. However, this method is not as powerful or as important as discussion. Through discussion, one person can learn about a multitude of other opinions and thoughts that might help them discover their own personal truth. This is key to healthy human development.

This is also a major argument in favor of freedom of speech. Without this freedom, people are afraid to share their beliefs and ideas because they don't want to be punished for sharing something that's considered immoral or even treasonous. Even when facts are presented, they don't really "tell their own story"—that is, their meaning isn't always readily apparently—unless other people are allowed to share their thoughts and opinions about them.

> Our merely social intolerance kills no one, roots out no opinions, but induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion. With us, heretical opinions do not perceptibly gain, or even lose, ground in each decade or generation; they never blaze out far and wide, but continue to smoulder in the narrow circles of thinking and studious persons among whom they originate, without ever lighting up the general affairs of mankind with either a true or a deceptive light.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Mill acknowledges that there is more freedom to express opinions or beliefs than there used to be because in modern times nobody has to worry that they will face physical punishments for simply having opinions. However, society invokes a far more insidious system of stifling the expression of opinions that diverge from the norm—people are so afraid of the social stigma attached to unpopular opinions that they'll choose not to share them at all, or else lie about them.

Society hopes that by suppressing divergent opinions, it will make them go away. However, as Mill points out, they *don't* go away, they simply go underground. Instead of lighting up all of society all at once, divergent opinions smolder from one generation to the next, occasionally leaping out far enough for others to see it. This also means that they tend to last longer than opinions that "blaze out." These opinions quickly die out once they lose energy, but by "smoulder[ing]," unpopular opinions manage to stay alive in society longer. That doesn't mean that this is necessarily better, but it is notable that society seems to prolong the life of unpopular opinions by forcing them to stay in hiding.

> The greatest harm done is to those who are not heretics, and whose whole mental development is cramped, and their reason cowed, by the fear of heresy. Who can compute what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters, who dare not follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral?

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 40

Explanation and Analysis

Mill believes that when people are compelled to hide their beliefs, it's not those with unpopular opinions who suffer most—it's those who actually accept popular opinions wholeheartedly who suffer. They live in perpetual fear that

someone might rightfully accuse them of heresy, and so they try to prevent even their inner thoughts from straying into dangerous territory. This is unnatural, which is why Mill describes their mental development as "cramped."

However, it's not just individuals who lose by this, nor just one individual's society, but the entire world. Mill wrote in the golden age of publication, when opinions penned by one person in France might be read the next week by a person in America. Opinions, therefore, were quickly becoming international rather than just regional or national concerns. This also means that people everywhere can learn and benefit from one person's opinions, but only if that person is confident about sharing them without persecution. Unfortunately, the stigma attached to being called "irreligious or immoral" is serious enough to deter most people from doing or saying anything that might fit that description.

> He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the truth view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of; else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty. Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men are in this condition; even of those who can argue fluently for their opinions. Their conclusion may be true, but it might be false for anything they know: they have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think different from them, and considered what such persons may have to say; and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

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Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

Mill believes the primary benefit of an environment where diverse opinions flow freely is that it equips people to both understand other opinions, and learn how to adequately form and defend their own. It is arguably more important for diverging opinions to be patiently listened to than it is for prevailing opinions to freely circulate in society. This is because everyone can learn something from hearing the sincere arguments against a certain opinion from someone who truly believes in what they're saying. This is decidedly different from hearing the same arguments from someone who doesn't believe those arguments. In order for anyone to truly understand an argument, they must hear it in its most "persuasive form," and only those who sincerely believe in their words can truly be persuasive.

Without free discussions in which all perspectives of an opinion can be openly shared and patiently listened to, Mill believes nobody is truly capable of understanding even their most deeply held beliefs, or the "doctrine which they themselves profess." This also means that the belief people have in their personal doctrines lacks something that can only be supplied by getting to understand another person's perspective of it and having the opportunity to defend it against attack.

> I much fear that by attempting to form the mind and feelings on an exclusively religious type, and discarding those secular standards […] which heretofore co-existed with and supplemented the Christian ethics, receiving some of its spirit, and infusing into it some of theirs, there will result, and is even now resulting, a low, abject, servile type of character, which, submit itself as it may to what it deems the Supreme Will, is incapable of rising to or sympathizing in the conception of Supreme Goodness. I believe that other ethics than any which can be evolved from exclusively Christian sources, must exist side by side with Christian ethics to produce the moral regeneration of mankind; and that the Christian system is no exception to the rule, that in an imperfect state of the human mind, the interests of truth require a diversity of opinions.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

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Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

One of Mill's most controversial beliefs is that Christianity and Christian morality are incomplete. Many believe the ultimate guide for ethical and moral behavior is found in the New Testament, but, as Mill points out, this morality once "co-existed with and supplemented" another code of ethics. Indeed, the relationship between the two was symbiotic—each derived some benefit from the existence and actions of the other. Without one (in this case the ancient Pagan beliefs that once coexisted with Christian ethics), the other loses something. In Mill's argument, it means that those who solely adhere to Christian ethics become "low" and "servile" instead of active and

enlightened.

Because Christianity is incomplete, its ethics must be supplemented. This, Mill believes, will result in the "moral regeneration" that modern society is so desperately in need of. This, however, means that people will have to accept "a diversity of opinions" on Christianity instead of immediately condemning anyone whose opinions are different (this swift condemnation of differences can be attributed to the "imperfect state of the human mind" in modern times).

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ 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 develope in him any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best. The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used. The faculties are called into no exercise by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Mill provide a compelling argument against conforming to custom just because it's the thing to do. Mill doesn't see anything wrong in adopting social customs or even being guided by them; the great evil is when people adopt social customs without thinking about them or considering whether these customs truly add to their personal well-being and happiness. One of humanity's most unique abilities is to think for themselves, but when one blindly accepts and adheres to custom, they are turning their back on this part of their nature, or the "distinctive endowment of a human being."

People can exercise their mental faculties by learning how to make intelligent and justifiable choices. For this, they need "perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, [and] mental activity." While all adults naturally have these qualities, they weaken with neglect. If a person doesn't exercise their power of judgment, they risk losing that power; if people don't engage their minds in critical thought, their "mental activity" weakens. Exercise is not just a physical activity, but also a mental one; and people must exercise both if they want to be healthy and fulfilled.

❝ It will probably be conceded that it is desirable people should exercise their understandings, and that an intelligent following of custom, or even occasionally an intelligent deviation from custom, is better than a blind and simply mechanical adhesion to it. To a certain extent it is admitted, that our understanding should be our own: but there is not the same willingness to admit that our desires and impulses should be our own likewise; or that to possess impulses of our own, and of any strength, is anything but a peril and a snare. Yet desires and impulses are as much a part of a perfect human being, as beliefs and restraints: and strong impulses are only perilous when not properly balanced; when one set of aims and inclinations is developed into strength, while others, which ought to co-exist with them, remain weak and inactive. It is not because men's desires are strong that they act ill; it is because their consciences are weak.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

Mill continues to explain the value of thinking for one's self and making intelligent decisions rather than blindly following custom. Following customs is not bad if it's "intelligent," meaning if the person who follows it knows *why* they are following and has considered alternative possibilities. Even breaking with custom is better than "mechanical adhesion to it" because breaking with custom implies that those who do it have put a lot of thought into it and have actively decided that it's better for their happiness to go against the grain.

Yet, as Mill points out, this is more acceptable than harboring unique "inclinations," or desires to do something that most if not all of society does not do. Society is afraid of strong impulses or inclinations because they threaten the status quo. When one person sees another person follow their natural desires, it might inspire them to do the same. Eventually, enough people will turn their backs on established actions and accepted impulses that those in power no longer have as much control over them. This is

what Mill means when he says people view individual impulses as "a peril and a snare." It's not the individual who's really in peril, but the established order of society.

> In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves—what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? [...] They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? I do not mean that they choose what is customary, in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature, they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own. Now is this, or is it not, the desirable condition of human nature?

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Mill explains that society as it is in the modern day is shockingly deficient in individuality. By saying that people "like in crowds," Mill means that nobody accepts or likes what isn't popular with others in their world. Instead of asking themselves what they *want* to do or what they *like* to do, they ask what is *acceptable* to do ("what is suitable to my position?"). Mill believes that people's tendency to ask what others would do is "worse" than asking what one should do because it highlights how dependent individuals have become on public opinion and their desire to conform to it to be accepted. This shows how society can control a person's internal life as well as their external actions.

Mill also points out that the real danger of conformity is that eventually people will have no individual "nature to follow." This means that they won't know how to navigate unique problems that the majority of society may not have faced, which would mean there is no prescribed formula for behavior. This reveals the greatest weakness one develops as a consequence of total conformity—without a formula to follow, they risk losing everything just because they don't know what to do or how to determine the best resolution to a problem for themselves. In this, people in modern society resemble herd animals instead of human beings. The answer to Mill's final question, then, is that the prevailing "condition of human nature" is *not* the desirable one.

> Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow. Genius can only breathe in an *atmosphere* of freedom. Persons of genius are [...] *more* individual than any other people—less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

Mill addresses the desirable quality of originality (a term that is somewhat interchangeable with "genius" in this context). Mill knows that nobody opposes originality in theory, but many still try to limit its development because it's so different from the status quo. When Mill says that people of genius are "*more* individual," he means that they naturally have less in common with those around them because most of society conforms to accepted forms of expression and behavior. Because they are "less capable" of conforming to society's wishes, they stand out for good or for bad. This makes it all the more important that they conduct themselves well so that the next person of genius isn't immediately condemned through the memory of the mistakes or even crimes of the previous genius.

Mill writes that society provides handy molds that "save its members the trouble of forming their own character." This implies that nobody really has a choice of what kind of person they'll be—society has predetermined their options. By preventing people from "forming their own character," society also protects itself from being challenged by

individuals who are capable of critical thought and judgment—those who didn't form their own character but rather fell into whatever society says fits them, don't have similarly strong critical thinking skills. Because of this, they don't challenge society's power or question why things are the way they are.

> In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Mill encourages his readers to embrace a spirit of nonconformity to put an end to social tyranny. Mill believes society's plight has become so serious that there *must* be an "example of nonconformity" for people to start following before society becomes totally incapable of accepting difference and diversity. In this environment, eccentricity is a "reproach" because it's a reminder of all that humanity *can* be, all that it's natural for it to be. It forces the prevailing powers to face the true cost of conformity. Eccentricity coexists with strength of mind and intelligence, so when eccentricity stands out, it indicates that society is losing its strength of mind. If this happens, society will cease to progress and become hopelessly stuck in place unless some external influence infuses new life into it.

The reason the scarcity of people willing to be eccentric is "the chief danger of the time" is because it means that the amount of genius in society is dwindling, and whatever is hanging on is too afraid to show itself and inspire others to do so, too. This adds a new sense of urgency to Mill's words—people must start standing up for their peculiarities and differences if they want to do justice to the lofty intellectual and artistic reputation Western society has earned before these things fall victim to conformity and public opinion.

> There is one characteristic of the present direction of public opinion, peculiarly calculated to make it intolerant of any marked demonstration of individuality. The general average of mankind are not only moderate in intellect, but also moderate in inclinations: they have no tastes or wishes strong enough to incline them to do anything unusual, and they consequently do not understand those who have, and class all such with the wild and intemperate whom they are accustomed to look down upon. [...] These tendencies of the times cause the public to be more disposed than at most former periods to prescribe general rules of conduct, and endeavor to make every one conform to the approved standard. And that standard, express or tacit, is to be without any marked character; to maim by compression [...] every part of human nature which stands out prominently, and tends to make the person markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

Mill continues exploring the negative effects of stifling individuality, originality, and the formation of new opinions. Mill briefly departs from his belief that many people are incapable of genius or individuality by saying that most people are actually just indifferent to these things. This is because the average person no longer experiences strong inclinations in any direction, either socially acceptable or not. In fact, those who do show strong inclinations in any direction are simply written off as "wild and intemperate." This is meant to portray people of strong inclinations as somewhat barbaric or even unnatural. Because of this, nobody feels particularly inspired or awed by their opinions or actions.

Mill believes the general lack of strong inclinations is what made the establishment of strict customs and rules of conduct possible. Mill describes this as a somewhat violent process: people were "maim[ed] by compression," which implies that, on some level, they have been hurt and disabled by society in the name of conformity. Human nature is naturally too big to be forced into an easily manipulated mold, which is why "compression" was necessary. It is also concerning that people conform to "tacit," or unspoken opinions. This highlights how society has ways of imposing its desires on individuals without

expressly stating what those desires are.

Chapter 4 Quotes

Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter. They should be for ever stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties, and increased direction of their feelings and aims towards wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading, objects and contemplations. But neither one person, nor any number of persons, is warranted in saying to another human creature of ripe years, that he shall not do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 86

Explanation and Analysis

Mill returns to his belief that people must be free to share their opinions and beliefs with others. In this case, however, he explores the importance of the freedom to help each other in practical matters through discussion. In another part of this essay, Mill points out that no individual is completely isolated in society. This is because society is a unit, and all its individual components play no small part in its successes and its failures. So, by offering advice to others and helping them make the right choice, people are also helping improve society as a whole. This is also the reason people should "be for ever stimulating each other" rather than allowing any part of society to lapse into immobility or stagnation. Duty to society also means duty to the individuals within it, and freedom of discussion is necessary to fulfilling one's duty to others.

However, this freedom has limits—nobody should use discussion to try and compel another person to make a certain choice. Individual liberty is still the most important part of society, so all people must not only be free but feel free to make their own choices even when it goes against someone else's advice. However, this is only the case with people of "ripe years," meaning legal adults. Society considers minors and young children incapable of making informed and reasonable choices, so it would be justifiable to tell a 14-year-old, for example, what they should do because they're not mature enough to truly recognize what's best for them.

If he displeases us, we may express our distaste, and we may stand aloof from a person as well as from a thing that displeases us; but we shall not therefore feel called on to make his life uncomfortable. We shall reflect that he already bears, or will bear, the whole penalty of his error; if he spoils his life by mismanagement, we shall not, for that reason, desire to spoil it still further; instead of wishing to punish him, we shall rather endeavor to alleviate his punishment, by showing him how he may avoid or cure the evils his conduct tends to bring upon him. He may be to us an object of pity, perhaps of dislike, but not of anger or resentment; we shall not treat him like an enemy of society: the worst we shall think ourselves justified in doing is leaving him to himself, if we do not interfere benevolently by showing interest or concern for him.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

Mill admits that people are not entirely unable to punish others for bad conduct or even just obnoxious habits, although nobody is within their rights to go out of their way to punish someone for it. Some personal habits or characteristics will inevitably get on other people's nerves, and those people are within their rights to avoid the obnoxious person. This is what Mill considers a natural consequence of bad conduct—while neither society nor the law is punishing a person for their individual conduct, they still must face the consequences of offending other people by being left out of social gatherings or avoided in public.

Mill makes the important point that those who violate social decency tend to "spoil[]" their own lives, and so they don't need to be openly punished by others. This is easy to understand, but what is more difficult is to treat people whose conduct offends others but only hurts themselves with patience and try to "interfere benevolently" if at all. This means that we must try to help people who are obnoxious to others (possibly even ourselves) because it is part of our duty to society. This reflects Mill's earlier point that human beings "owe" something to one another on the basis of common humanity if nothing else.

> If there be among those whom it is attempted to coerce into prudence or temperance, any of the material of which vigorous and independent characters are made, they will infallibly rebel against the yoke. No such person will ever feel that others have a right to control him in his concerns, such as they have to prevent him from injuring them in theirs; and it easily comes to be considered a mark of spirit and courage to fly in the face of such usurped authority, and do with ostentation the exact opposite of what it enjoins[.]

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Mill argues that if people do have strong characters, they will never submit to forced conformity if it involves going against their nature. When a person is "coerce[d]," it means they are being forced into something, either through physical force or even deception. This means that people of strong characters will rebel against being lied to as well as against physical force. Additionally, they don't need a fully formed character, but just "any of the material" which goes into creating one. Because of this, society might inadvertently create strong characters by trying to force a seemingly weak character into an unnatural mold or social position.

However, even strong characters acknowledge that others have a right to "control" them if they've done something to hurt another person. This highlights the role a sense of justice and morality has in a strong character—even when they are facing punishment, a person with strong character will recognize the rightness of it. Mill calls the power society has over individuals "usurped authority" when they use it to wrongfully control another person, which echoes his belief that individuals are "sovereign" over themselves.

> A theory of 'social rights', the like of which probably never before found its way into distinct language: being nothing short of this—that it is the absolute social right of every individual, that every other individual shall act in every respect exactly as he ought; that whosoever fails thereof in the smallest particular, violates my social right, and entitles me to demand from the legislature the removal of the grievance. So monstrous a principle is far more dangerous than any single interference with liberty; there is no violation of liberty which it would not justify; it acknowledges no right to any freedom whatever, except perhaps to that of holding opinions in secret, without ever disclosing them: for, the moment an opinion which I consider noxious passes any one's lips, it invades all the 'social rights' attribute to me by the Alliance. The doctrine ascribes to all mankind a vested interest in each other's moral, intellectual, and even physical perfection, to be defined by each claimant according to his own standard.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Mill criticizes and condemns the radical belief that one person can invoke legal justice or even moral outrage against another person just for doing something the first person doesn't agree with. Part of individual liberty in a free society means that people are going to do things that others don't like—it's the price citizens pay to enjoy a free society. As obnoxious or even offensive as others' actions might be, people must learn to accept these differences because the moment they begin trying to persecute or punish them, free society risks devolving into tyranny.

This belief that one person should be punished just for doing something another doesn't like is extremely dangerous because it "acknowledges no right to any freedom whatever." In other words, once someone adopts this line of thinking, they immediately strip away all freedoms from all people, including themselves. Furthermore, this creates an atmosphere in which people hide their opinions; Mill already explained that this is harmful to society because it denies society the opportunity to learn and maybe even adopt a new truth. It is ironic that this "doctrine" of "social rights" encourages the same kind of diversity it seeks to eliminate—it leaves so much up for individual interpretation ("perfection, to be defined by each claimant according to his own standard"). However, it is a self-defeating doctrine because even it will be destroyed over time when someone accuses it of being offensive and violating their social rights.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Whoever succeeds in an overcrowded profession, or in a competitive examination; whoever is preferred to another in any contest for an object which both desire, reaps benefit from the loss of others, from their wasted exertion and their disappointment. But it is, by common admission, better for the general interest of mankind, that persons should pursue their objects undeterred by this sort of consequences. In other words, society admits no right, either legal or moral, in the disappointed competitors, to immunity from this kind of suffering; and feels called on to interfere, only when means of success have been employed which it is contrary to the general interest to permit—namely, fraud or treachery, and force.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

For most of the essay, Mill has asserted that society is only ever justified in interfering with individual lives when an individual has violated the liberty of or hurt another. However, in this passage, he examines the unique cases in which one person is hurt by another, but that other person doesn't deserve to be punished. Mill recognizes that people get hurt when they lose—when they lose a promotion or an award or when they lose the time and effort they put into try to achieve these things. However, it would be unjust of society to exact punishment against the winner just because the loser is hurt. Doing this would discourage all competition and thus all ambition, which would hinder society's ability to improve. More importantly, people are discouraged from dwelling on the hurt other people feel when they lose because otherwise people might become so afraid of hurting people (not of being punished for it, but actually hurting people) that they stifle their own abilities. This actually hurts society as a whole because then that person is not contributing as much positive work as they naturally can.

Perhaps more importantly, nobody is saved from the unique "kind of suffering" that accompanies losing a competition. This is because that pain can also teach a lesson and serve as motivation for the individual to improve their skills and abilities so that they won't lose again. In this way, loss motivates improvement on the personal level which contributes to improvement on a national level. Interference is acceptable where there's "fraud or treachery, or force" only because these things violate individual liberty.

A person should be free to do as he likes in his own concerns; but he ought not to be free to do as he likes in acting for another, under the pretext that the affairs of the other are his own affairs. The State, while it respects the liberty of each in what specially regards himself, is bound to maintain a vigilant control over his exercise of any power which it allows him to possess over others. This obligation is almost entirely disregarded in the case of the family relations, a case, in its direct influence on human happiness, more important than all others taken together. The almost despotic power of husbands over wives needs not be enlarged upon here, because nothing more is needed for the complete removal of the evil, than that wives should have the same rights, and should receive the protection of law in the same manner, as all other persons; and because, on this subject, the defenders of established injustice do not avail themselves of the plea of liberty, but stand forth openly as the champions of power.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

While Mill illustrates how his beliefs about the limits which society can justly place on individual behavior, he zeroes in on the tendency of one person (typically a man) to assert power over another (a wife, children, or both). Throughout the essay, Mill rails against despotism because crushes individuality and individual freedom. Here, however, he directly links 19th-century marriage to despotism—the husband becomes a despot; the wife, the victim of tyranny. A marriage, in this sense, is like a small community in which it is easier to see how despotism limits not only freedom, but also happiness. At the same time, the wife is particularly vulnerable—there is nobody to help her because the established law of the land (both marriage and English society in general) does not afford her equal legal protection. Mill has already established that the power one person has over another should be limited, but here he shows how the prevalence of this issue is as common in England as marriage.

Unfortunately, the "defenders of established injustice" (the "established injustice" being the lack of legal protection or

equal rights for wives) do nothing to end this evil because they themselves are generally husbands, and so it is not in their best interest nor in accordance with their love of power to grant equal liberties to women.

❝ The objections which are urged with reason against State education, do not apply to the enforcement of education by the State, but to the State's taking upon itself to direct that education: which is a totally different thing. That the whole or any large part of the education of the people should be in State hands, I go as far as any one in deprecating. All that has been said of the importance of individuality of character, and diversity in opinions and modes of conduct, involves, as of the same unspeakable importance, diversity of education. A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another: and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government, whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation, in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body.

Related Characters: John Stuart Mill (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Mill explains the unique role the topic of educating children plays in society—some argue that education is the provenance of fathers, but others see the benefit in the State forcing families to educate their children outside of the home. When the State "direct[s]" education, it simply requires all families to educate their kids because it helps improve society as a whole. Mill's objections to the idea that the State should actually be the one to educate children directly reflects his belief that the State is eager to enforce conformity and stamp out individuality. Mill also emphasizes the fact that conformity benefits leaders because it gives them more control over the inner lives of citizens. Notably, he points out that prevailing powers aren't always political; they might be "a priesthood" (religious) or aristocracy (class divisions).

Mill's argument makes it clear that whoever is in charge of a society seeks to develop total power over its people. This is a far cry from the early hopes of those who believed a representative government in which leaders were elected from the people would be fair, impartial, and motivated by the interests of the state instead of their personal interests. Democracy or constitutionality, then, has devolved over time, which could explain why Mill desires a "moral regeneration" (which he mentioned in an earlier passage) that might be strong enough to reignite a love of absolute individual liberty, equality, and justice.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTORY

Mill begins by explaining that this essay is about "Civil, or Social Liberty," which has to do with what kind of power can be "legitimately exercised" over individuals and how far that power should extend. Mill believes that this question is vitally important for the future, although it is not a new one. Indeed, mankind has been divided over this question since the dawn of civilization and the struggle between people's love of freedom and aversion to authority characterized Western history from time immemorial. Mill explains that, in this context, liberty means protection from political tyranny. This was especially true in the distant past when one person or small group of people typically held all the political power and could do with it what they pleased. This power was seen as both necessary for protection but dangerous because that power could be used against citizens as well as external threats.

Mill immediately introduces the reader to the fact that there is a "legitimate[]" form of power, which implies that there is also an illegitimate form. This means that Mill, by defining what power is legitimate, will also establish what power is illegitimate, or wrong. Any power's existence in a society creates tension because, as Mill points out, there's always the risk that it will be used to oppress people. This means that most if not all societies are, to some degree, on their guard against their leaders.

Mill writes that even though rulers were considered potentially dangerous, people thought it necessary to have one in order to help defend weaker citizens from stronger ones. To that end, "patriots" made various rules that would limit the amount of power a ruler could rightfully exercise over society. This was done in two ways: by establishing legal rights for citizens of the state (and, if the ruler infringed upon them, it would justify rebellion) and by forming a representative body chosen by the community to make important decisions. In Europe, rulers were somehow compelled to adhere to this first method, but putting the second method into practice was harder. However, Mill asserts that most people reconciled themselves to being ruled by a single leader so long as that leader didn't infringe too heavily on their liberty.

The term "patriots" calls to mind early American revolutionaries who did, in fact, revolt against British tyranny and establish a system of government which represented the will of the people. However, the fact that other societies were willing to submit to the rule of one leader or group of leaders that they didn't get to choose so long as those leaders didn't infringe on their rights, shows that most people's highest priority is in winning personal liberty, not in setting up an ideal government.

Eventually, people began to believe that political rulers should not be an independent body with its own interests. Instead, people embraced the idea that they should be able to remove magistrates and other leaders from their offices "at their pleasure." To many, this seemed the only way to prevent leaders from abusing their power. Ultimately, the cry for "elective and temporary rulers" overcame the cry for limiting the power of rulers. Mill writes that limiting a ruler's power was simply something to use against rulers whose personal interests opposed society's. This new trend indicated a growing desire for leaders whose will was the same as the people's, who were chosen by and responsible to the citizens, and who could be removed from office for violating the trust people put in them. This thinking, Mill writes, gained popularity in the previous generation and is still prevalent in Continental Europe today.

Mill writes that people wanted to be free to remove leaders "at their pleasure," meaning that people didn't want to have to go through a lengthy process of proving the necessity of removing a leader—the fact that the people want to remove a leader should be ample justification for their removal. Mill also notes the growing interest in "elective and temporary rulers," meaning rulers that were chosen to fill a leadership position rather than inheriting it; furthermore, that position would be short-term rather than lifelong. This is a drastic departure from how Mill describes earlier governments where one individual or group inherited their leadership and stayed in that position for their whole lives.

Mill writes that despite the high hopes people had for this new form of government, time revealed the system's faults. For instance, people initially believed that they didn't need to limit their own power over themselves, but they soon discovered that only the will of the most politically active or biggest group of people was reflected in the actions of the representative government. In other words, the majority can oppress and tyrannize over the minority. This means that limiting the government's power means nothing when the government is beholden to the will of the majority. Mill calls this "the tyranny of the majority" and says the concept is generally considered a problem that society must protect itself against.

The tyranny of the majority developed in step with the establishment of representative government. It would seem that citizens inadvertently replaced the possibility of political tyranny with the likelihood of social tyranny. Although leaders could be removed from office if they overstepped their bounds, there is very little a minority group can do to prevent the majority from becoming tyrannical.

Mill writes that the tyranny of the majority was initially dreaded on political grounds. Mill argues, however, that when society is the tyrant, the methods it uses to oppress individuals go beyond political action because society also creates its own rules. In this respect, social tyranny can be far more dangerous than political tyranny because it is far more difficult to escape it. Because of this, Mill asserts that society must protect itself from social as well as political tyranny. Mill believes that there should be a limit to how much power public opinion should have over individual lives, and it is society's duty to determine these limits and maintain them. Mill doesn't think anyone would object to this in theory, but the practical question of how to do it is harder to answer. After all, everyone's happiness depends on limits being placed—both legally and socially—on people's actions.

There is frequently some distance between governments and their subjects. While citizens are definitely affected by political decisions, they are not always surrounded by them the way they are by society. This is why there's such little hope for escape from social tyranny—where would someone who feels society is oppressing them run? This is especially complicated in a society governed by a representative body because their actions will represent the will of the majority, which is typically also the source of oppression both political and social.

Mill explains that the question of what rules should be imposed on a society has always been important, and the answers tend to change from one generation to the next. Still, each generation thinks the answer is as simple as if everyone has always agreed on it. Mill argues that this is an "illusion" that he attributes to custom, which is frequently mistaken for human nature and which people generally don't question. Furthermore, individuals believe that others should have to act the way they want them to. This is based on opinion instead of reason, but if by chance others share the same opinion then it's accepted as an adequate reason to expect others to conform to it.

The power and prevalence of custom saves people the trouble of too actively searching for the answer to the question of what rules of conduct society should adopt. This is why Mill says it's an "illusion" for society think that finding answers is easy. Furthermore, the answers seem easy to find because individuals are inclined to believe their own codes of conduct are best and that everyone else should adopt them.

Consequently, Mill says that whenever there's an "ascendant class," most of the "morality" of the country stems from that class's interests—people either conform to or reject that morality depending on whether the "ascendant class" is popular or not. In this way, mankind is subservient to what they believe are the opinions of the ruling classes. Mill maintains that this isn't hypocritical of mankind because it has inspired genuine feelings that have led to the establishment of new moralities that have nothing to do with class interests. While many people have theorized about what rules society ought to follow, few have explored the question of whether opinions should "be a law to individuals." In some cases, they try to turn people against the opinions that they themselves don't live up to rather than advocating for greater general freedom.

The "ascendant class" is the class that holds all the power—either political, social, or both—and which most people generally consider superior. "Morality" in this context is not limited to just beliefs or values, but codes of social conduct. "Moral" actions will tend to support those in power while "immoral" ones go against the desires of the ascendant class. Furthermore, Mill points out that in this system, opinions can become "law[s]," which implies that they will be enforced and any dissenters from them will be punished by society through their judgment and ill opinions.

Mill says there's one subject on which people generally take the "higher ground": religion. Religious hatred (*odium theologicum*) is one example of the fallibility of prevailing morality—it is hatred, which is bad, but it's still a "moral feeling." Mill provides an example of how religious hatred has prevailed in history: when groups of people began leaving the "Universal Church," they were as unwilling to tolerate religious differences as that church. At the end of this battle between different religious sects for supremacy, all the different churches had to ask to simply exist and differ in peace. Mill believes the world owes thanks to a few writers who advocated for freedom of conscience and rejected the notion that individuals *must* belong to one religion or another. Still, intolerance runs rampant and very few societies have truly achieved religious freedom and some societies are prejudiced towards specific religions or beliefs.

"Higher ground" in this context simply means that people rarely choose to get into serious arguments about the topic of religion. Mill notes that religious hatred is a "moral feeling." This is because it's a feeling that's rooted in ideas of right and wrong even if most people condemn the feeling for its negativity. The "Universal Church" Mill references is the Catholic Church, which dominated Western culture for centuries and was so widespread that it was considered "universal," or the default. Unfortunately, years of progress have not stamped out religious intolerance. Without true religious freedom, few societies can truly call themselves free.

Mill writes that in England, the law is relatively light while social opinion is uncommonly heavy. Furthermore, most English citizens are particularly sensitive about the idea of direct government involvement in their personal lives because they maintain the belief that the interests of politicians are opposed to the interests of the people—they have not yet fully adopted the idea that they control the government. Mill believes part of this is because there's no widely recognized rules for how much power the government *should* have over individual lives, and the opinions on this are so widely varied that it'd be difficult to find enough common ground to appease everyone.

Although there is still distance between the English people and their rulers, the relationship is icy and characterized by suspicion. This prevents society from taking full advantage of the usefulness of representative government. Furthermore, although it might be difficult to find common ground between all the different opinions on how much power government should have, the only way to find it is to work with each other and the government, which requires citizens to be more open to accepting their leaders instead of being suspicious of them.

Mill asserts that this essay's purpose is to identify a principle that can determine the extent to which society can deal with individuals through political and/or social means. Mill identifies this principle as "self-protection," and it's the only ground on which others are justified in interfering with individual lives. While society can plead or argue with an individual to either do or not do something, they cannot force that person into any course of action or inaction. The only element of personal conduct for which a person must answer to society is that which affects other people. Over one's self, however, the individual has entire control. This concept only applies to capable adults, not children or minors. Additionally, Mill argues that "Despotism is [...] legitimate" when it comes to "dealing with barbarians" with the intention of improving their lives.

Mill generally considers despotism one of the world's great evils because it stamps out individual liberty. So it is a true testament to how difficult Mill thinks it is to "deal[] with barbarians" (people who don't belong to a developed civilization) that he would be willing to place them under a despotism, even if it's only temporary. It shows that Mill has no faith in "barbarians" to know their own minds or be able to make reasonable decisions. In other words, they don't yet deserve liberty, which contradicts the belief that liberty is a right.

Mill also explains that he believes "utility" is the greatest reason for determining the answer to all ethical questions if it's founded on the long-term best interests of humanity, which will progress and change over time. Mill believes this justifies placing limits on people's behavior when that behavior affects other people. When one person does something that hurts another, that person should be punished either legally or through public opinion. Furthermore, people can be compelled to do things that will help others, such as testifying at trial or standing up for someone who's being victimized somehow. Inaction, too, can be punished if it results in another person being hurt. This, however, has exceptions, such as when any action might create worse evils. In these cases, Mill believes that the person's conscience is an adequate judge, and they need not be externally punished.

Mill was raised as a utilitarian, so he places an extremely high value on a concept's "utility," or usefulness. In this case, limiting everyone's ability to do things that negatively affects others is useful because it helps prevent crimes that might ruin a society's general happiness or welfare. Similarly, compelling people to present evidence in trials is useful because it helps judges and juries determine whether a crime has indeed been committed and what the best way of punishing the criminal is.

Any actions or choices a person makes that only directly affect themselves is outside the realm of society's right to interfere. Mill identifies this as the "appropriate region of human liberty." It includes inward thoughts, the freedom of forming and sharing opinions and ideas, the freedom to choose one's own path in life and how to follow it, and the freedom to congregate with other people for any reason *other than* to cause harm to anyone else. Without these liberties, no society is truly free no matter what kind of government it has. Mill argues that the only freedom worth having is that which allows people to follow their own happiness in their own way as long as they don't hinder others from doing the same. Ultimately, humanity thrives under these conditions rather than by being compelled to live a certain way.

The existence of an "appropriate region of human liberty" implies the reverse as well—there is a region in which individual liberty has no place. This region includes any that affects the liberties of other people. For example, one cannot censor others because freedom of speech and the press is a human right in a free society. It is equally prohibited to do anything that might prevent someone from pursuing their individual happiness.

Mill says that this concept isn't new, and it opposes society's tendency to try to compel individuals to conform to accepted standards of living. In ancient times, governments directly interfered in personal lives to force people to live up to certain standards. This might have been acceptable in some cases back then but has no place in the modern day. Still, society attempts to control individuals within it by fighting back against any divergence from the prevailing opinions. Mill also says that, more and more often, society tries to exert control over the individual through legislation as well as through social opinion. Although this strengthens society by creating unity, it also diminishes individuality and is characteristic of the human tendency to try to force one's own opinions about how to navigate life on everyone else. The power to do this, unfortunately, is growing rather than shrinking.

In ancient times, the primary struggle was between society's desire for liberty and political oppression. In the modern day, the primary struggle is between individuality and social tyranny. This highlights how more and more focus is being placed on personal liberty and relationships instead of the general relationship between a ruler and their subjects. This also reveals that even though governments are more representative, government is still somewhat disconnected from individual lives.

Mill says it will be easier for him to focus his next argument on the topic of independence of thought rather than the broader subject of human liberty in general. The freedom of thought is, as Mill explains, inseparable from the freedom of writing, publishing, and speaking. Although many societies accept this basic freedom, many don't understand the ideas upon which it's founded. Mill says it's important to understand these grounds because they can also be applied to other basic liberties.

Freedom of thought (and, by extension, freedom of speech, writing, and publishing) is perhaps the most personal freedom that Mill identified in his list of proper individual liberties. Thought is the dominant force in a person's internal life, but Mill wants his audience to not only accept it as a right, but to understand why *it must be so.*

CHAPTER 2: OF THE LIBERTY OF THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

Mill writes that the time for defending freedom of the press is past, nor is there any need to persuade people of its necessity. So many writers have written about it from this perspective that there is no longer a need to dwell on it. Most constitutional governments wouldn't dare put limits on freedom of the press. Society has no right to silence anyone—either through public opinion or legislation—just because their personal opinion differs from the rest. Mill argues that silencing any opinion is evil because it robs all of humanity of the opportunity to either improve by conforming to it or improve by using a false opinion to better determine the truth. Mill proposes to explore both ideas separately.

Mill's argument that society has no right to silence opinions reveals what he believes is one of the greatest social evils: censorship. People don't generally own up to their support of censoring anything because of the stigma attached to censorship, but Mill zeroes in on the fact that silencing divergent opinions by stigmatizing those who hold them is as reprehensible as deliberately censoring the publication of a book or song.

First, the opinion in question might be true even though those trying to suppress it believe it's wrong. Still, nobody has the right to deprive others of hearing the opinion and determining its worth for themselves. The assumption that a divergent opinion is false is the same as assuming one's own infallibility, and this argument can be used to condemn it. Unfortunately, people rarely consider their own fallibility in practical matters, nor do they try to protect themselves from it. People generally benefit from hearing their opinions contradicted, although they run the risk of putting too much confidence in the infallibility of the opinions which the people in their social circle hold. This belief in other people's infallibility isn't shaken by acknowledging that other worlds (times, cultures, churches, and so on) hold other beliefs, and fate determines which world a person is born into.

Believing in the infallibility of anyone—be it one's self or another person—is dangerous because it gives that person too much power. If they claim to be infallible on one topic, it is conceivable that they would claim to be infallible in general and thus gather followers and exert undue control over them. This infringes individual liberty and holds society's development back because these people would inevitably silence any discussion about opinions that might introduce people to new modes of living or thought.

Every age has held false opinions that later ages go on to condemn, but Mill rejects the idea that people should simply stop holding opinions or enforcing those they have reason to believe are true on these grounds. In fact, if society, after careful deliberation, decides an opinion is true, there is a moral obligation to act on it and oppose opinions that are considered false or dangerous to society. Mill reiterates that just because the actions of past ages—including opinions, taxes, and even wars—have been condemned doesn't mean modern societies shouldn't act upon their beliefs. Additionally, there must be freedom to contradict any opinion as discussion provides the opportunity to explore whether the opinion is true or not.

Mill wants to impress upon the reader the necessity of identifying and maintaining a balance between holding meaningful opinions and being willing to let those opinions go if something better comes along. In other words, it is incredibly important that everyone in society keeps an open mind, both for their own benefit and for society's.

Mill believes that people are generally rational and capable of fixing their mistakes. They do this by gaining experience through trial and error, and through discussing opinions and ideas with other people. These discussions must be allowed to take place in order to create positive change in society. Mill argues that only people who are open to criticism of their opinions—something which they ultimately profit by—deserve to be confident in their truth and wisdom. In fact, Mill thinks it wouldn't be a bad thing to require supposedly wise men to be questioned by the public. Mill argues that even the Catholic Church (which he considers the most intolerant of criticism) considers arguments against canonization before granting someone sainthood.

Mill chooses to use the Catholic Church as an example here because the Catholic Church was, in Mill's day, notoriously considered closed-minded, old-fashioned, and very unprogressive. In other words, if the Catholic Church will listen to arguments, then why wouldn't the average person?

Mill argues that even the beliefs people hold most dear must remain open to criticism from others because there may always be a "better truth" out there. Although most people will admit that this is a valid point, they still object to debating the topics that they are certain are right. Mill writes that certainty can only be attained through discussion, no matter how uncomfortable. There are also opinions which people believe must be protected for the good of society and for this reason should be protected from criticism because they are useful to society. However, even this—whether an opinion is useful—is an opinion and still requires a fair discussion both for and against its truth. Mill believes that the truth of an opinion is a major part of its usefulness, which is why criticism of an accepted opinion's usefulness is quickly condemned.

By using the phrase "better truth," Mill emphasizes the fact that even opinions people cast off have some amount of truth to them, or else they wouldn't have been very important to anyone. It also implies that there are varying levels of truth, which is confirmed later when he asserts that an opinion might contain a partial but not a whole truth. A "better truth," then might just be a more comprehensive one than the one previously held.


Mill continues to address the human impulse to deny others the opportunity to hear an opinion on the grounds that we personally think it's wrong. He illustrates the problem with this by exploring the argument *against* freedom of thought when it comes to a belief in God. Mill acknowledges that others might accuse him of saying faith in God is assuming infallibility. Mill retorts that he doesn't consider "feeling sure of a doctrine" the same thing as assuming infallibility, but making that decision for other people and refusing to let them hear arguments over its truth, morality, or piety is detrimental to society. Prohibiting debates over an opinion's morality or piety is dangerous to society because of how often they have punished people for immoral opinions or conduct. Such is what happened to the great philosopher Socrates, who was put to death for alleged impiety.

Mill dives straight into a controversial and emotionally charged topic that most people would avoid discussing: religion. This immediately catches the reader's attention and prepares them to encounter some very unusual opinions for a 19th-century English writer. Mill differentiates between assuming infallibility and "feeling sure of a doctrine." This phrase is notable because it emphasizes the fact that if one "feel[s] sure" about something then there is room for doubt or open-mindedness to new ideas that one might "feel[]" are better.



Mill also uses the Crucifixion of Christ (accused of blasphemy) as an example of how governments punish people for their alleged immoral or impious opinions, and how Marcus Aurelius—by all means a just man—persecuted Christians because he feared Christianity would do more harm than good to the world. Many people will say that those who opposed Christianity were right to do so because truth *must* be able to pass through that kind of persecution. Mill finds fault with this because it implies that those who introduce any new truths should be punished for it. He asserts that people who hold this opinion must believe that there are no more new truths to be discovered.

Mill uses Christ and Marcus Aurelius to make his point, and both examples highlight the fallibility of humanity's judgment. There is a lot of irony in the fact that Christ—founder of what would become one of the most influential and widespread religions ever—was crucified for blasphemy. With this example, Mill highlights just how much society's beliefs about someone or something can change.

Mill argues that the belief that truth always triumphs over criticism and persecution is false because history is full of instances when truth has been put down and either never resurfaces or is set back hundreds of years. In fact, persecution usually does succeed unless those who believe in a truth are stronger than those who persecute them for it. This is clearly seen in how Christianity continued spreading in the Roman Empire despite persecution. Mill rejects the idea that truth has some mysterious power over error and argues that people are often as enthusiastic about errors as they are about truths. The actual advantage truth has over error is that it frequently reappears in the world until it is finally accepted.

When people put too much faith in the idea that truth will always triumph over human error, they risk losing truth entirely by waiting to see if it withstands criticism instead of learning more about it for themselves. Mill's ultimate argument here is that people shouldn't wait to see if a possible truth withstands criticism but should join the discussion of it and decide for themselves.

Mill acknowledges the argument that, in the modern day, people are no longer put to death for divergent religious opinions, but he also argues that this doesn't mean society is totally free from legal penalties for it. As an example, Mill brings up a real case in which a man was denied justice against a thief in court because the man said he had no religious belief due to a law which prohibits anyone from presenting evidence if they don't believe in God. This practice assumes that the oath to tell the truth means nothing without religious belief. Mill considers this rule absurd because it implies all atheists are liars while requiring them to lie about believing in God to assert their rights in court. Furthermore, the law insults actual believers by implying they only tell the truth out of fear of spiritual punishment rather than natural honesty.

Mill points out that there are no longer severe legal punishments for not abiding by prevailing religious beliefs, but he also reminds the reader that this doesn't necessarily mean people are totally free to believe whatever they want. Actually, society is so accustomed to enforcing accepted beliefs and opinions that they don't always recognize how discriminatory minor laws can be against nonbelievers, as in the cast of having to take an oath before God.

Mill writes that this practice is hardly persecution and that many will simply attribute it to the "infirmity of English minds," which makes them hold on to bad principles even when they no longer really want to practice them. However, Mill worries that persecution on religious grounds will resurface due to a widespread revival of religion, which typically brings with it a "revival of bigotry." Where there's already a tendency towards intolerance, it doesn't take much for people to start actively persecuting those with divergent beliefs. Mill argues that the social stigma attached to people who disown widely held beliefs prevents England from being "a place of mental freedom." All those who aren't financially independent rely on society for work, and so they adopt prevailing beliefs because they must be accepted by society in order to get honest work. The upper classes, however, only risk being gossiped about.

Mill describes English minds as "infirm[]," or weak. This means the reason they hold on to bad habits is because they are not mentally capable of the kind of intelligent conversation that breaks the mold and fosters new ideas. The "infirmity of English mind" is also the reason the land doesn't nurture "mental freedom." Everyone thinks the same thoughts, and very few are capable of intelligently discussing new ones. Interestingly, a revival of religion brings with it a "revival of bigotry," meaning hatred or prejudice, which goes against the love and tolerance that most religions preach.

Mill argues that even though we don't punish people very severely for holding different opinions, society still hurts itself in mistreating these people. Because of the lack of social tolerance, people hide their opinions entirely or else these opinions circulate through narrow circles and never make their way to the mainstream. In this way, society remains in a state gratifying to those who think it's unpleasant to punish people and who want prevailing beliefs to go on undisturbed. This creates some level of intellectual social peace but prevents potentially great minds from openly and fearlessly sharing new ideas or beliefs. The rest of society, too, narrow their thoughts to what is socially acceptable and never enlarge their mind through "free and daring speculation on the highest subjects."

For speculation to be "daring," it must be somehow different, original, and the person who originates it must be willing to take a risk by sharing it. The "highest objects" Mill references are topics like religion, morality, philosophy, and justice. However, these discussions typically reflect the status quo of the modern day and are therefore dangerous because they may lead people who are unhappy with the way things are to challenge them. This can threaten the supremacy of the "ascendant class" Mill referenced earlier.

Some might think it's good for those with divergent opinions to keep them to themselves, but Mill reminds the reader that this corrodes the minds of the faithful more than the minds of heretics. Mill explains that the faithful will purposely cramp their own minds and refuse to follow any natural train of thought out of fear that they might have a heretical thought. Still others will strive to hide their heretical thoughts and outwardly conform to social expectations. Mill argues that nobody can be a great thinker without following the natural course of their thoughts, and that truth itself has more to gain from having its errors pointed out than by people adhering to it just because it's the thing to do.

It can be argued that people generally fear social stigma more than legal punishments because, as Mill said earlier, social stigma is more difficult to escape or recover from. Because of this, people begin to fear their own thoughts and would rather suppress any original idea or "daring speculation" out of fear of being stigmatized as a heretic, which would be social suicide.

In a "general atmosphere of mental slavery," there may be an occasional great intellect that asserts itself, but society itself will never be intellectually active. When discussions of humanity's most important subjects are considered closed, mental activity declines until a period—such as the Goethian period in Germany or post-Reformation period in England—when people no longer fear divergent opinions. During these periods, immense intellectual steps are taken that benefit all of humanity. However, another of these periods will never arise unless society openly asserts its mental freedom.

A "general atmosphere of mental slavery" is created when society stigmatizes certain beliefs or trains of thought. Many people feel helpless in the face of their fear of censure, and so they make themselves subservient to prevailing opinions. However, it is a testament to the strength of humanity's desire for progress and growth that there are periods in which mental activity asserts itself and humanity takes huge steps forward.

Mill moves on to the second part of his argument and assumes that new opinions prove true instead of false. Mill asserts that even the firmest believers in their opinions will recognize the value of discussing them more fully because otherwise opinions become "a dead dogma" instead of a "living truth." There are some people who believe individuals should blindly accept a truth without question. While this prevents people from questioning truth, it also makes the truth weak to argument. Even if this weren't the case, Mill argues that truth held this way devolves into superstition. It's Mill's opinion that for one to truly understand the truth, they must know enough about it to defend it in discussion. This isn't something that can be taught like in math where there's one right answer—when it comes to opinions, finding truth means understanding and finding balance between conflicting beliefs.

Truth and opinion exist in a grey area where there are no definite answers, unlike in math or science where certain principles can be definitively proven. A "living truth" is one that people actively engage with, either through forming or discussing their own opinions on it. It's something people internalize and feel deeply, which is different from a "dead dogma" that people passively accept into their lives because custom dictates that they should.

Mill explains that in topics like religion or morals, there are numerous perspectives from which to view a question, and those discussing it frequently have to work to dispel any appearances that might indicate the truth of a different opinion over their own. People must understand the opposing arguments to a question in order to combat them. If they can't do that, then they must refrain from making a judgment or else adopt the most popular opinion. Furthermore, a person must hear these arguments from someone who truly believes them, not just from someone who shares their same belief but still knows the opposing side's arguments. Even many of the world's most educated people make the mistake of only hearing arguments from people who don't believe them rather than those who do, and therefore don't truly understand or know the truth of their opinions or how to defend them.

When people devote their energy to discrediting different opinions in order to discredit their truth, they do themselves a similar wrong as when they try to silence another opinion entirely. Trying to discredit an opinion means one is not open to truly discussing it and has already decided that it's false instead of remaining open to the possibility of its truth. Mill also reemphasizes the importance of allowing people to express divergent opinions as a means of stimulating conversation that keeps everyone's mental faculties sharp and useful.

Mill writes that someone who opposes free discussion would say that it's not necessary for *everyone* to know *all* the reasons why an opinion is true. They would say that it's enough for there to be *some* people capable of explaining it and the rest to trust them. Mill points out that even this indicates the need for people to know *all* objections to a truth have been answered, but it'd be impossible to do this if nobody is free to bring objections up for debate. The Catholic Church addresses this by separating those who are allowed access to all the arguments and texts against their beliefs, and those who must accept belief as truth. In Protestant countries, however, the belief is that everyone must be able to decide what to believe for themselves and so there must be freedom of speech and press.

When people argue that it should be okay for only some *people to both know and be able to defend the truth, they are advocating for humanity to do the bare minimum towards bettering itself. When so much of society sits in ignorance of the reasons for their belief in certain opinions, society limits its own average level of mental activity and risks falling into an intellectual decline that would be difficult to recover from. Furthermore, this attitude encourages people to let others think for them instead of embracing their own capacity for critical individual thought.*

Mill also argues that without free discussions about truth, the meaning of the opinion is also lost, degraded to nothing but a few words that cease to convey real, living meaning. This can be seen in the formation of different religions—the early days are characterized by passion and vitality, but if they prevail in being accepted as truth then discussion over it dwindles until people passively accept religion rather than actively experiencing it. Without a need to argue over its truth and fight for it to be accepted by dissentients, believers lose interest in talking about it and no longer question the beliefs of others because they see no need to defend their beliefs. This creates a disconnect between religious principles and inner consciousness, which remains vacant and passive rather than active.

Mill reiterates his belief that opinions can deteriorate into "dead dogmas" when people no longer actively discuss them. This contradicts the belief that truth has some mystical power to stay alive no matter what—it actually loses meaning and dies when people cease talking about it. This highlights the fact that truth, no matter how beneficial, is fragile, and people must take care of it.

According to Mill, the extent to which doctrines remain in the human mind as little more than dead beliefs can be seen in how most Christians hold their beliefs. Even though all Christians profess to embrace the laws of the New Testament, few are guided by those laws in their personal lives. This is complicated by the fact that most people feel compelled to adhere to social custom, which might be generally in keeping with Christian laws, but not always. Mill asserts that, too often, people give their real allegiance to custom rather than Christian law. While all profess to hold the beliefs passed down in scripture, few believe them enough to routinely act on them. This is because these beliefs hold no real power over ordinary believers, who tend to look to external influences for guidance rather than scripture.

Mill's argument here touches on how insincere many people are in their beliefs. Simply keeping a belief out of habit or because others expect one to do so isn't sincere belief. This would imply that people who do this are hypocritical because they don't truly embrace the opinions and beliefs they expect others to hold and defend. Mill also highlights humanity's tendency to accept an idea or opinion in theory, but struggle to act on it in real life.

Mill writes that things were different in the early days of Christianity, the proof of which can be seen in how far and rapidly Christianity spread. In the modern world, Christianity is mostly limited to Europe or European descendants. Even the most adamant believers cling to newer beliefs (like Calvin's or Knox's) that they have more in common with rather than the fundamentals. This concept—that once a subject is beyond debate, people generally lose their passion for it—can be applied to other topics. There are truths or bits of knowledge that everyone simply knows, but nobody internalizes until personal experience shines a new light on them. Mill says that this is because some truths can't be understood until people experience them firsthand. Still, the tendency to stop thinking about something once it's beyond doubt is the reason for most mistakes.

Mill argues that people are most passionate about opinions or beliefs when they are new and must be defended. This seems to be another argument in favor of keeping discussions about all topics alive and for encouraging those with divergent beliefs to feel free to share them—in arguing over the validity of a belief, a person might remember why it meant so much to them in the beginning. This also reveals humanity's love of novelty. Even while it might resist change, society gets a thrill from the introduction of new doctrines.

To those who question whether unanimous agreement *must* spell doom for ideas, Mill says that he disagrees. He admits that as society progresses the number of debatable doctrines will slowly decline as people discover the truth. When society reaches this point, it would be beneficial to find teachers who can make compelling arguments against truth for the benefit of learners. Similar systems can be found in Socratic dialogues in which Plato presents opposing and supporting arguments for a topic. However, a student who only learns from books will be ill-prepared for actual debate. It's far better to learn through discussion, although a student must be on guard against viewing all discussion as an argument rather than a means to learning truth. Instead, Mill believes we should thank and listen to those who are willing to challenge our opinions because they help keep our minds active.

Earlier, Mill said it was important for everyone to hear arguments on both sides of an opinion from people who genuinely believe what they're saying. He contradicts himself here by saying it's actually okay to just encourage people who don't really believe something to argue in favor of if for the sake or argument. This is a noble cause, but could be considered insincere by many.

Mill highlights another benefit of allowing diversity of opinion: one side of the question is rarely totally true and the other totally false. In fact, usually the accepted belief only holds part of the truth and the opposing belief holds the rest of it. Popular opinions typically hold an exaggerated portion of the truth while heretical ones contain suppressed truths that supporters claim is the whole truth, and the two sides must be taken together to discover what the truth is. Rather than instinctually revolting against new opinions that say popular opinions are totally false, a good judge of human thought and conduct will recognize that both sides of the question are overlooking the partial truths found in each opinion. In fact, they will recognize the value of energetic opposition to popular opinion because it helps draw attention to the partial truth of their doctrines.

Mill sees a group of opinions as a group of half-truths that, when put together the right way by the right people, will reveal a whole truth. This requires a lot of cooperation between people that are also placing themselves in opposition to one another in their opinions. Mill argument here also highlights the benefit of trying to cultivate rationality and reasonableness in people rather than encouraging blind passion. People must be patient and reasonable with one another to discover the whole truth in their two different opinions, after all.

Mill writes that if a state's politics includes "a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform," then it is a sign of good health at least until one or the other is capable of balancing both order and progress at once. Until the differing opinions of each can be expressed and protected in equal measure, one side of the scale will always outweigh the other. This is similar to the discovery of truth, which frequently requires combining opposite opinions to find the whole truth. Unfortunately, few people are impartial enough to do this and the struggle between the two sides continues. Whatever opinion is accepted reflects the neglected needs of society at that time. This is why it's important to listen to dissent from popular opinion because "truth would lose something by [...] silence."

Mill's opinion that political environments benefit from having two opposing parties reflects his belief that in the rest of society there should be people who oppose prevailing opinion, and that these two sides should work together to find common ground and truth. Mill has already established that truth loses meaning when people no longer discuss it and simply adhere to it as a custom.

Mill responds to the assertion that this concept can't apply to Christianity-based morality—which is supposed to be the whole and absolute truth—by questioning what exactly is meant by Christian morality. Mill writes that if it's the morality of the New Testament, then there's a problem because that book builds off a preexisting morality. One would have to look for morality in the Old Testament, which Mill asserts is actually "intended for a barbarous people." Ultimately, Mill asserts that Christian morality should actually be called "theological" morality, as it predates Christianity. Humanity does owe a lot to the gradual formation of modern Christian morality for helping create successful societies, but Mill still believes it's incomplete and describes it as a reaction against pagan beliefs. Furthermore, it is more negative than positive in that there are far more rules for what people *should not* do rather than what they *should*.

If the New Testament actually reflects the cooperation of an established morality with a new one, then it is the perfect example of the good that can come out of cooperation and a willingness to accept certain parts of a differing opinion. Mill believes the morality of the Old Testament is better suited to "a barbarous people." In other words, it's better for people who aren't civilized, just as he believes despotism is beneficial to "barbarous" cultures and civilizations.

Furthermore, Christianity idealizes "passive obedience" and encourages selfishness by claiming the fear of hell and hope of heaven should be a person's primary motive in their actions. Mill also says it disconnects people from positive interest in their peers unless there are self-interested reasons in helping them. Indeed, any sense of duty to society and government comes from ancient Greek or Roman sources, not Christian ones. Still, Mill says that he doesn't consider Christian morality wholly incompatible with a comprehensive morality but believes that it was intended to be only part of the whole truth, making it useless to look to Christianity for comprehensive morality. Mill fears that exclusively teaching religious morality instead of including secular morality does society a great wrong by encouraging servility to a higher will, which prevents a person from becoming truly good. Because of this, it's better for some "other ethics" to coexist alongside Christian ones.

Mill views "passive obedience" as another one of society's ills. It results in the death of meaning and the decay of truth, which is also why Christian ideals by themselves are an incomplete form of morality. On the other hand, if people are too active in forming new opinions, then eventually they might begin debating the usefulness of Christianity (an incomplete doctrine), which would be a huge blow to the accepted order of things. Instead, Mill encourages readers to find the use of secular morality instead of condemning it for not being Christian.

Mill argues that this doesn't mean people should ignore the parts of the truth that exist within Christianity as they begin to accept the parts of the truth that exist outside of it. Instead, people should fight against the tendency to claim a partial truth as the whole truth, and any unjust behavior on this score should be patiently tolerated. Furthermore, Mill believes Christians should remember that some of the most valuable modern morals came from the teachings of people who knew and rejected Christianity. Even this will not prevent sectarianism because there will always be people who insist their opinions are the whole truth. However, suppressing a partial truth is worse than any conflict between parts of the truth because it creates prejudice, and so both sides of the question must be free to share their opinions and audiences should be free to judge which is best for themselves.

Mill doesn't limit his pleas for cooperation and toleration from Christians, but from non-Christians, too. This highlights how both sides tend to be closed-minded towards the other because it's such a polarizing topic. Each side must develop enough tolerance and reasonableness to recognize the good in the other side if they are ever going to determine what the partial truths of each side can contribute to each other .

Mill summarizes his argument in favor of freedom of opinion, saying it has four distinct grounds: first, that opinions must not be silenced because they might be true and because silencing them implies infallibility; second, the suppressed opinion might contain a partial truth that, combined with prevailing opinion, could form a whole truth; third, that even if an opinion is accepted as a whole truth it will languish and die if people stop voicing differing opinions on it; finally, without discussion, the meaning of truth will be lost or transformed into a mere profession that few people truly internalize and benefit from. To those who claim there should be limits placed on these discussions to keep them fair, Mill says this is impossible because people tend to take offense to any powerful argument against their opinions and accuse the other of being unreasonable.

Once again, Mill describes how truth and meaning tend to lose their worth when people don't talk about them. Furthermore, Mill believes that when people become passionate about a subject because the arguments are powerful, it is a good rather than a bad thing. Passion, after all, is what drives opinions forward when they are first conceived, so these feelings should be encouraged for as long as possible.

Mill does admit that there are conditions in which a person might be censured for their manner of sharing opinions, but it's hard to determine what those conditions are. It's also difficult to impose limitations on discussions to keep both sides—not just the side which opposes the prevailing opinions—from becoming unreasonable, as many people argue there should be. The worst thing society can do is stigmatize those who don't share prevailing opinions, particularly because people with unpopular opinions are already at a disadvantage. Furthermore, the law has no right to restrain discussions on opinions, but opinion itself should condemn those who are malicious in sharing their opinions and praise those who can keep a level head in heated discussions. This is what Mill considers the "morality of public discussion," and he's comforted by the belief that most people adhere or at least strive to adhere to it.

This is one of the instances when Mill recognizes the usefulness of public opinion in its capacity to condemn and penalize people for wrongdoing that is not technically against the law. This is particularly true because the power of the government over discussion should be very, very limited since discussion, speech, and press are all major elements of individual liberty.

CHAPTER 3: ON INDIVIDUALITY, AS ONE OF THE ELEMENTS OF WELL-BEING

Mill says that having established the reasons why people should be free to form their own opinions, he will now turn his attention to whether people should be equally free to act on them provided it doesn't include harming another person. Mill believes everyone can agree that people shouldn't be as free to act as they are to think. Indeed, society should interfere in some way if one person's actions harm another. However, it *is* desirable that people should be free to act in whatever way they want in matters that only concern themselves. When custom dictates what people can and cannot do, people cannot achieve true happiness and these restrictions hinder social progress.

Mill repeatedly refers to the importance of prohibiting people from doing harm to others. He does this to constantly remind the reader that there is a limit to all liberty—or at least there should be. Recognizing and respecting this limit is just as important as the concept of liberty itself.

Mill asserts that the greatest obstacle this principle must overcome is the general indifference people have towards individuality. This would change if more people saw individuality as a key component of well-being. The majority is typically happy with society as it is because they made it so, which makes it hard for them to understand why others wouldn't be happy with the status quo. In fact, the majority sees "spontaneity" as a negative because it threatens the established order of things. At the same time, nobody thinks that the best a person can do is copy what everyone else is doing instead of using their individual judgment in their personal affairs. In fact, Mill argues that it's the "proper condition" of adults to interpret experience and knowledge in their own way because customs won't help them navigate their unique personal experiences and personalities.

Just as most truths lose meaning when people stop talking about them, individuality has lost its attraction because society is so unused to seeing it. In this passage, "spontaneity" is synonymous with individuality. Both of these things imply a departure from the collective norm, which society instinctually rebels against. By "proper condition" Mill also means that it's natural for capable adults to think about and discuss their experiences and opinions, which implies that it's the improper condition and unnatural for people to not *discuss these things.*

Mill also explains that adhering to custom just because it is custom does nothing to help people live up to their potential as human beings. People who let custom dictate their behavior gradually lose the ability to choose anything for themselves because they don't use their own minds to make the best decision for their individual circumstances. Mill believes that a person's mental faculties need exercise just as much as their body does, neither of which will get stronger if they're neglected. In fact, adopting an opinion just because it's what everyone else is doing will weaken a person's mental faculties as they engage in "ape-like [...] imitation." Mill writes that it's not just what people *do* that's important, but what kind of people are doing things. Human nature shouldn't be treated like a machine meant to do a certain thing, but a living thing that deserves to grow naturally.

Conforming to opinion is easy and even favorable because people don't have to stress themselves out by thinking about it or worrying about whether they're making the right choice. However, the bad outweighs the good—someone might have saved themselves the need to think too hard about something, but they sacrifice part of their mental faculties every time they decide to let public opinion or custom determine what they should or should not do. The result, as Mill puts it, is that people become "ape-like," meaning they lose part of their humanity too.

Mill writes that most will agree that it is better for people to exercise their mental faculties to decide whether to adhere to or deviate from custom rather than blindly follow it. However, there is less support for the idea that people should have their own desires and impulses. Many fear that people with strong impulses will do bad things but ignore their potential for good if they are taught to cultivate self-control. After all, people who can balance their strong impulses with self-control are said to have a good character while those who blindly follow custom are accused on having none. To condemn a person for too much individuality is, according to Mill, the same as saying society is better of without people with strong character.

Mill describes a society as torn between admiration of individual character and fear of what will happen if a character is too strong. Strong characters are unpredictable because it is not their habit to simply do what's expected (indeed, if they did, they wouldn't be considered a strong character). This unpredictability threatens society's stability, which might be the evil which strong characters are liable to commit.

Mill writes that in early civilizations, it was difficult to get people with strong minds and an abundance of individuality to adhere to the legal and social rules of that community. To accomplish this, churches and governments tried to control every aspect of a person's life. Now the problem is reversed: there is a lack of individuality and society has too much influence over individual lives. People no longer ask themselves what they'd prefer or what would be best; in fact, they don't even imagine having desires apart from what the majority believes they should have. Under these conditions, humanity's virtues die out. Mill asks the reader if this is "the desirable condition of human nature?" Mill points out that Calvinists—who believe in the complete suppression of individual will (considered sinful) in favor of total obedience to God's—would think so.

Earlier, Mill pointed out that people were more energetic about defending religion and opinions when they were being formed, although now discussions are largely stagnant. Something similar is seen in Mill's statement that there was more individuality and strength of mind when civilization was just beginning than there is now that civilization is well-established. Mill evidently doesn't believe this is the "desirable condition of human nature," but by pointing out that Calvinists would disagree with him, he also illustrates how differing perspectives can form widely different opinions on the same subject.

Mill says that some people undoubtedly do believe that when people surrender their individuality, they are doing as God intended. However, Mill believes that if people were created by an omnipotent being, then that being would want them to make use of their individuality, not sacrifice it. Indeed, there is something to be said for self-assertion rather than constant self-sacrifice, and in cultivating individuality one becomes truly noble and life becomes richer. Furthermore, individuality enables people to become more useful to themselves and to society. The only suppression a society needs is that which prevents one person from hurting another, which also helps both individuals (because it teaches them to think of others) and society in general. Anything that crushes individuality, either in the name of God or in the interests of leaders, is despotism.

Mill presents two diverging views on the relationship between God and individuality: one group believes God accepts the sacrifice of individual will as fitting homage to his greatness, and the other side believes God gave humanity individuality so they could use it, presumably to do good in society. In any case, individuality is nearly considered sacred, which is why people should protect their individuality from the tyranny of opinion.

Mill writes that nobody can deny that originality is important to social progress. People with originality, after all, are the ones who develop new truths, begin new practices, and pave the way for change. Not everyone can do this, though—very few people have the kind of genius and originality needed to pioneer new social practices. Those that exist, however, not only create new practices, but breathe new life into old ones and help prevent them from degenerating into meaningless mechanical action. For a society to have originality, it must maintain the atmosphere for its growth. Although people with originality are scarce and less able to comfortably conform to public opinion, some of them do try, thus depriving society of their genius. Those who do break out and overcome society's prejudice against nonconformity, leave a lasting mark.

Originality, like a strong character and individuality, makes one stand out from the rest of society. Originality cannot be achieved by passively accepting society's social dictates and opinion, implying that it requires individuality to thrive as well as a conducive atmosphere of liberty. Furthermore, it is in society's best interest to encourage originality because it stimulates growth, discussion, and positive change.

Nobody disagrees with the necessity of originality outwardly, but inwardly most people think society could do without it. Mill explains this tendency by saying that "unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of [originality]," but that everyone should remember originality is meant to open their eyes, and all the good things in existence are the result of some past originality. Additionally, people must believe there is still room for improvement, as mediocrity is on the rise in society. Instead of thinking for themselves or taking the advice of leaders, people allow others just like themselves to think for them. This bleeds over into government, which has never risen beyond mediocrity except when the majority let themselves be guided by more gifted intellectuals. All truly noble things are initiated by gifted individuals, and average people are fortunately able to follow their lead.

An "unoriginal mind[]" is unable to conceive of new ideas on its own, which is why people with unoriginal minds struggle to understand the principle or usefulness of originality. If they were introduced to true originality, however, they might be better able to understand it because one of the benefits of originality is that it opens people's eyes to alternative practices and modes of thought. However, society has become more suited to mediocrity (which is widely accepted) than originality (which many treat with suspicion). The danger of this is that if mediocrity prevails, society cannot achieve greatness—this is something only originality, activity, and individuality can achieve.

Mill argues that when the popular opinion becomes dominant, there is a greater necessity for individuality to be more pronounced in those who are capable of originality. Although there have been times when it was better not to act too differently, in the current day more people should refuse to conform to popular opinion—eccentricity is a reproach to society, and it always exists in proportion to the amount of genius or originality within a society. The greatest danger of the modern day is that few people dare to embrace their eccentricity. Mill also argues that embracing individuality is not only useful for creating new practices for all of society, but average men and women can embrace theirs in order to determine the best way for them to live their unique lives, which will likely differ from one person to the next.

Nonconformity is an act of rebellion against social tyranny, and the hope is that it will achieve the same kind of liberty that soldiers in the American Revolution won against the British. Seen in this light, rebellion is a good thing. Unfortunately, as Mill notes, few people are willing to rebel against conformity because the fear of social consequences outweighs their desire to fully embrace their natural characters.

Mill points out that nowhere except in monastic communities is diversity of preference entirely ignored. For instance, anyone in modern society can like or dislike smoking, music, or chess; however, anyone whose actions diverge from the norm is denigrated as if they committed a crime. Currently, opinion is formed by people who, lacking strong desires themselves, cannot understand them in others. Because of this, society looks down on anyone with strong desires as if they were "wild and intemperate." Modern society is uniquely disposed to force universal standards on everyone, which includes limiting desires and suppressing anything that makes a person stand out from the crowd. Consequently, weak feelings and energies generally reign supreme. Furthermore, England's greatness is collective rather than individual. Some people think this is good, but Mill argues that it was great *individuals* that made England great, and they will be needed to save it from decline.

Just like unoriginal people can't understand originality, people who don't have strong impulses can't understand why others do. This further highlights the point that many people are simply incapable of understanding differences in others, which is part of why serious differences aren't tolerated very well. However, the current state of society is such that differences must be allowed to exist, or else society will become stagnant. This is reflected in Mill's statement that England needs great individuals (not the mediocre ones that dominate public opinion) to save it.

The supremacy of custom currently stands in the way of progress by attacking the desire to achieve something better than prevailing customs. Liberty is the source of progress but is the antithesis of custom because it demands that one get out from under the power of public opinion. Mill argues that in the East (namely China), custom has essentially wiped out history and left entire cultures stationary. Progress can be achieved by any culture for a length of time, but it ends when individuality is forced out of it. While Europe itself embraces change and progress, it demands that everyone change at the same time. Still, Europe is at war with individuality, and the danger is that it will face a fate similar to China's—for all of its great works and accomplishments, Europe (like China) might simply stop progressing because there will be no new ideas.

As Mill writes, Europe professes to love change and progress, but it also demands conformity in this by requiring all people to change at the same time. However, individuality and nonconformity play important roles in progress, which means society must learn to tolerate nonconformity if they truly desire progress. If Europe stops progressing, it will fall into the same stagnation Mill says characterizes modern China.

Mill addresses the question of what has saved Europe from falling into stagnation like China: it's because Europe is immensely culturally and socially diverse. People from various cultures, nations, and classes have pioneered new paths and, though at times intolerant of each other, have generally benefitted by diversity. Still, Europe is gradually leaning towards making everyone alike as the boundaries that once divided society begin to crumble. People read and listen to the same things and increasingly direct their hopes toward similar objects as society begins raising the lower classes and lowering the upper ones. This tendency is driven forward by the supremacy of custom even in state matters as politicians refuse to contradict public opinion. The resulting hostility towards individuality can only be stopped if people feel its value. The time support individuality is *now*, before society reaches the point that it immediately condemns all deviations from custom.

The natural diversity of European culture helps protect it from facing a fate similar to China's. This reflects, on a much bigger scale, an argument Mill made in favor of diversity of opinion—it helps prevent truth and society from becoming stagnant. Diversity, then, is not just important when it comes to opinions or perspectives, but in cultures, beliefs, and practices because all of these things are stimulating to society and keep it active. When society is passive, it risks devolving into mediocrity (such as in the current state of things, according to Mill) and meaninglessness.

CHAPTER 4: OF THE LIMITS TO THE AUTHORITY OF SOCIETY OVER THE INDIVIDUAL

Mill argues that individuals should be free to act in any way they want provided the action only affects themselves, not other people. When individual actions *do* affect others, society should be free to interfere. Mill asserts that while "society is not founded on a contract," everyone who lives in society owes something to it in return. This means individuals do not have the right to hurt fellow citizens (which includes hindering them from pursuing their personal interests) and they must contribute to the maintenance and security of society against harm. These are things society is justified in enforcing legally; society can also punish people through public opinion of them if they hurt others without technically violating their legal rights. However, society's right to interfere does not extend to individual actions that only affect the individual, provided they can make reasonable decisions.

When Mill argues that "society is not founded on a contract," he seems to be referencing Enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau's political treatise, The Social Contract. In it, Rousseau asserts that society is based on a contract between leaders and followers. This contract establishes what the relationship between leaders and subjects should be as well as what individuals owe to society for being allowed to live in it. Mill again shares his opinion that people are only free to act if they don't hurt anyone else, and society is only justified in interfering with individual conduct if it affects someone else.

Mill assures the reader that he doesn't mean that people shouldn't take an interest in another individual's conduct. On the contrary, people should *want* to help each other make good choices for their lives and discourage each other from making bad ones. However, nobody has the right to prohibit a capable adult from having the ultimate say in their individual conduct. Only individuals can determine what their best interest is; the interest of society or other people in their actions is typically indirect and secondary. General rules should be enforced for how people treat each other, but not for how they treat themselves—any consequences that a person might inadvertently inflict on themselves are outweighed by the great evil of letting other people think and decide for them.

It is in society's best interest that the individuals who make it up should make good decisions. It's even more important that they should actively choose to make good decisions instead of passively accepting a decision because it's in keeping with social customs. Furthermore, when society makes rules for how a person can or cannot treat themselves, it encroaches on the individual's basic liberty.

Mill also says he doesn't mean to imply that a person shouldn't be judged by others based on their merits. Society may either admire or condemn an individual for having either good or bad qualities, respectively. A person may be widely avoided or condemned for having extremely negative personal qualities even though they don't impact anyone else, and it is an act of charity to tell them about these bad qualities before they get out of hand. Furthermore, people have a right to act on their bad opinion of another person by avoiding them, warning others to avoid them, or giving another person preferential treatment over the other, as long as one does all these things honestly instead of maliciously. In this way, society naturally punishes individuals for cultivating offensive habits or characteristics even though the individual isn't breaking a law.

There is a difference between avoiding a person because they're obnoxious and making a point of avoiding someone as a way to punish then: the former is done to protect one's self from needlessly uncomfortable social interaction, the other is meant to inflict pain on another person (which, by Mill's definition, is a violation of their rights). Furthermore, it's better to help a person rectify their bad behavior instead of ignoring it because it's better to eliminate an annoyance than spend one's time and energy trying to avoid it.

Mill writes that the minor inconveniences an individual suffers because society judges them negatively for personal conduct is the full extent of what society can inflict on them for actions that only affect themselves. However, when another person is hurt—such as when one individual lies to or takes unfair advantage of another—punishment and reprobation is justified. The personal qualities that lead to conduct that harms others are also worthy of public abhorrence but cannot be punished as actions. Individuals are not accountable to society for their own lack of self-respect or moral development. People can distance themselves from an unfavorable person, but they cannot punish that person for being unlikable. Instead, people should bear in mind that this individual is already suffering for their mistakes, requires help, and people should treat them with patience instead of anger unless they have violated the rights or safety of others.

People can't be punished for their personal qualities. In other words, they can't be punished for simply being who they are or for their natural faults. People might be justified in helping others get rid of bad qualities and develop good ones, but they are not justified in causing such a person an injury just because they're annoying or offensive. Above all things, Mill argues for patience when dealing with someone who's behavior is obnoxious because this helps maintain social peace between people.

Mill admits that many people will reject the idea that there is a meaningful distinction between behavior that only affects an individual and behavior that affects others. The grounds for this argument are that nobody exists in total isolation, they have relationships that might be indirectly hurt by their actions. Society, too, may be hurt by an individual's mistakes because they may render themselves unable to contribute to society or even deplete society's resources. Additionally, an individual may hurt society by setting a bad example to others. Mill also acknowledges that people will question whether society really has no right to interfere with adults who are evidently unfit to make good choices, or if society is truly not justified in prohibiting things (like gambling) that have long been established as moral vices. These rules, of course, would not limit individuality, but protect people from repeating the mistakes of past generations.

Mill acknowledges that there are adults in a society that might not be fit to make reasonable decisions. This could be because they have a mental illness or they might even be drunk. In both cases, however, society is not only justified but encouraged to help them make good choices because otherwise they might make a decision that hurts themselves, others, or society in general.

Mill acknowledges the truth of these concerns and explains how society should determine whether to interfere. When a person violates an obligation they owe others through their actions—like spending money they owe to others or making an investment that deprives their family of money they need to support themselves—then society is justified in reprobating or punishing them. Similarly, if a person makes a selfish choice that prevents them from being able to perform a duty they owe to society, then they can be punished for it. As an example, Mill says nobody can be punished for being drunk, but a soldier can be punished for being drunk when they're supposed to be working. In other words, simply risking damage to another person or society, the action is subject to the judgment of public opinion or the law.

Forming obligations is nearly always optional—one chooses to take out a loan or get married. However, once one enters an obligation, they also choose to place new limits on their actions because they are no longer free to follow their impulses; they must stop and think of the people (either individuals or society in general) who are counting on them to honor their obligations. However, this might actually be a good thing because it might be enough to prevent individuals from committing a painful mistake.

However, when a person's individual conduct doesn't violate their duty to society or hurt another person other than themselves, society must simply deal with the inconvenience. Furthermore, Mill believes that if a person is going to punished for not taking proper care of themselves, then it should be for their protection instead of under the pretense of the public welfare. However, Mill also argues that society must wait until a person has committed a wrong to interfere because society has almost total control over people's development from the time they're children through education. Indeed, the current generation is best equipped to prepare the next generation for to be just as successful as the current, if not more so. Because of this, society has nobody to blame but itself if adults are generally incapable of reasonableness.

Society itself creates the people who make it up. In other words, one of society's duties to individuals is to help prepare them to lead honest, productive, and useful lives as adults. When society neglects that duty, it violates its obligations and is therefore deserving of whatever evils befall it as a result. This is something the current generation must keep in mind when they interact with the next generation if they want to ensure their society's continued success.

Mill states that society is already equipped with providing education and the power of prevailing opinions (which exercises control over individual minds), so it shouldn't also have the power to demand obedience to rules governing individual conduct that doesn't affect other people. Furthermore, Mill maintains that if there are any individuals with strong characters in society, they would rebel against overbearing authority and even act in opposition to it. Also, Mill believes that when it comes to setting an example to others, if an individual is making choices that only hurt them individually, then they also set an example of the natural consequences of poor behavior.

Mill doesn't deny that society should have some power over the people who make it up—including to help educate them for active social involvement and to pass judgment on people who violate established social rules—but this passage highlights how difficult it can be to determine just how much power society should have. If a society has too much power, there might be a rebellion that creates long-lasting damage if it gets out of hand; not enough power, and a society can't effectively prepare individuals for a productive social life.

According to Mill, the greatest argument against society's interference in an individual's actions (aside from those which affect others) is that when it does, it is frequently wrong because it's driven by "overruling majority" without considering the opinions and particular beliefs of the minority. There are people who are offended by the opinions other people hold and both sides can get passionate about it, but Mill believes there is no real similarity between the feelings of one person for their opinions and another who resents or is offended by that opinion. When society interferes in human affairs, it is usually because it's offended by someone acting differently from the established norm, although people try to attribute the need for interference to religion. Those who do this argue that certain dictates are right simply because they *are*, and so society *must* accept them.

Majority rule fails to account for individuality, and so a society driven by the majority will be unable to really understand or help members of minority groups. The difference between a person who holds an opinion and one who is offended by that opinion is that the person who holds the opinion owns that opinion; on the other hand, the person who's offended by the opinion wishes to deprive them of it. Only one of these things (wishing to deprive someone of an opinion) is a violation of individual liberty and so it is the only sentiment worthy of abhorrence.


Mill states that he wants to provide examples of people's tendency to employ a "moral police" that encroaches too far on individual liberty. The first example includes Muslim societies in which the majority refuses to eat pork because of their religious beliefs. If they established a law which prohibited eating pork, nobody could accuse them of religious persecution because nobody's religion requires them to eat pork, but some might see it as a violation of individual liberty. A similar question can be asked about the rightness of laws prohibiting all clergy from marrying in Spain, which is predominately Catholic (Catholicism prohibits clergy from marrying). People who think these things are immoral can make a compelling argument in favor of suppressing them, but by this logic they must be willing to accept being suppressed in the name or morality in societies in which they are a minority.

Having a "moral police" is in itself a violation of individual liberty. People must be allowed to form their own opinions and, by extension, their own morals. A "moral police" would either try to force morals on others, or at least try to make them outwardly conform to them. Furthermore, just because the majority of a society supports certain rules or laws doesn't mean society in general supports them—even the majority is only one part *of society, as Mill explained in the beginning of the essay.*

Mill writes that some other examples that occur closer to home might be easier to understand or relate to. These examples include limitations being placed on how people are allowed to enjoy their free time or the general disapprobation (namely in the United States) of people frivolously spending money even if they can afford it. As far as laws that encroach on individual liberty goes, Mill uses a widespread American law prohibiting the sale of alcohol as an example. This law, however, punishes people for drinking alcohol (a private act and the one society wishes to stop) rather than for selling it (a public act) because people consider drinking alcohol a potential threat to individual security. Mill argues that this perspective of social rights is dangerous because it can be used to punish any kind of behavior any individual disagrees with or claims to be offended by.

One of the fundamental tenets of individual liberty is that people are free to act however they want privately because if it's private, it can't hurt another person. However, public acts can hurt others. This explains why Mill felt it important to point out that, under America's prohibition law, people were being punished for largely private acts. Under this condition, America cannot truly call itself free.

Mill says that a similar argument can be made about the legislation that demands certain types of work stop on Sundays because it's considered a religious day (notably only by Christians, not by Jews or many other minority religious). This legislation prevents individual people from deciding whether to work on Sundays, which encroaches on individual liberty. Furthermore, it favors one group's beliefs over another's. In a similar vein, Mill sharply criticizes American society and government for persecuting Mormons for practicing polygamy in the desert after being driven out of their home state. Although Mill doesn't agree with polygamy himself, he believes that if it only occurs between consenting adults, then nobody has the right to punish them for it. Furthermore, external interference on behalf of oppressed people is only acceptable when those people ask for it.

The fact that Sundays are legally observed as a day of rest (for most) shows just how much power Christian teachings have over English society. While English society is generally willing to acknowledge and respect Christian beliefs, Mill implies that society might not be so willing to do the same for other religions—lest the majority was from that religion. The story of the Mormons is unique because they are a form of Christianity, and American society's persecution of them highlights the fact that, really, only some *forms of Christianity are truly tolerated.*

CHAPTER 5: APPLICATIONS

Mill admits that the principles in this essay require more detailed discussion before they can be practically applied in society. Still, he says he will provide examples of possible applications to help clarify how society can use these principles. Mill writes that there are two maxims that combine to form this essay's primary point. The first is that the individual is not accountable to society for anything they do *unless* their actions affect others. The most society can do is offer the individual advice and try to convince them of the right choice, but it cannot compel them to do or not do anything. The second is that if an individual does do something that hurts the interests of others, the individual must be held accountable either legally or socially depending on the action.

Mill again asserts that individual liberty ends when individual actions hurt other people. It's also at this point that society is officially justified in interfering for the greater good. It is important that individuals realize and accept that they don't have unlimited freedom, and if they violate what freedom they do have, it's only right that they should be held accountable for it, either socially or politically.

Mill argues that just because society is only justified in interfering in individual behavior if it harms or risks harming another person doesn't mean that society is justified in interfering every time one person is hurt by another's actions. For example, if one person hurts another by winning a competition, then society shouldn't get involved because society has already decided people should be allowed to pursue their own goals without worrying about the pain those who aren't as successful in their endeavors feel—unless, of course, someone has used malicious means to attain their goals.

Mill identifies the one instance in which one person's actions might hurt another, but without deserving to be punished. People should always consider whether their personal actions might hurt another person, but in the case of competition or careers, the individual must also abide by another's decision, as in the case of a promotion. A person can't simply give up on their native ambition just they might indirectly hurt others along the way by accomplishing what they could not.

Mill reminds the reader that trade is a "social act" and thus falls under society's legitimate jurisdiction. Under the modern theory of free trade, merchants are free to determine prices and manufacture goods at their discretion and buyers are free to choose to purchase goods from someone else. The question of how much power society can rightfully exert over certain details of trade—such as sanitation or protection for people in dangerous career fields—is still somewhat vague, especially because some details have to do with the individual liberty of the buyer. As an example, Mill describes the controversy surrounding selling poison, which can be used for legitimate purposes as well as criminal ones (namely to commit murder). Mill's opinion is that society is within its rights to make sellers take precautions that might discourage people from buying poison for malicious reasons, such as keeping a sales register.

Mill's suggestion that people who sell poison should keep a careful sales register of who buys it is ideal because it serves as a crime deterrent (someone who bought poison to kill someone might change their mind once they find out that their purchase can be traced back to them) without encroaching on anyone's rights. Of course, for this work, Mill accurately guesses that people who are buying poison for legitimate reasons wouldn't care that they also have to sign a register.

Mill admits that society's right to take precautionary measures to prevent crimes before they're committed reveals the limitations of his belief that "purely self-regarding" actions shouldn't be interfered with just to prevent an evil. Mill further illustrates this point by saying he doesn't believe general drunkenness should be punishable, but that it might be a good idea to put restrictions on people who habitually become violent when drunk. Still, society must remember that it cannot always punish people for actions which only hurt themselves unless they are done publicly and thus become a social problem (like "offences against decency"). On the other hand, giving advice (a social act) shouldn't be interfered with because it violates the freedom of speech and the freedom of listening to opinions. Even this is thrown into doubt if the person giving advice derives a personal benefit, possibly pecuniary, from it.

If an action is "purely self-regarding" then it only affects the person committing it, and thus it falls under the protection of individual liberty. This passage also identifies a limit to the freedom of speech: if it's being used towards self-serving and potentially harmful purposes, then speech shouldn't be protected. The freedom of speech is founded on the idea that people will use this freedom honestly; when they cease to use it honestly, they deserve to be punished for it.

The idea that one person might give advice that supports what society believes is evil to another person presents a new complication because it implies the existence of people and groups whose primary interests oppose society's best interests. Mill asks if society is justified in interfering with people or groups who engage in behavior that society considers a social evil (like gambling or drunkenness). One side of the argument is that these things fall within individual liberty and must be tolerated. The other side could argue that intervention is justifiable because the "instigators" are not disinterested, and society loses nothing by trying to stop them. Mill agrees with the former opinion and even rejects the idea that society can rightfully increase taxes on or limit access to these things because it infringes on personal liberty. However, these establishments can be penalized if habitual "breaches of the peace" happen there.

In this context, "instigators" are those who have something to gain by propagating social evils. They make engaging in these behaviors possible. However, there is some question surrounding who is most to blame: the "instigators" for provided the tools of vice, or those who take advantage of what "instigators" have to offer? When Mill mentions "breaches of the peace" as justification for penalizing establishments that, for example, provide alcohol, he means if any crimes are committed there (physical fights, for example).

Mill refers back to a point he made earlier in the essay that since individuals are free to decide what to do with their own lives, groups of people are allowed to make joint decisions through mutual agreement to regulate things that affect all of them. This is okay if everyone's will is the same, but since will changes over time, people should also be free to end their agreements. Mill uses slavery—namely when one person willingly sells themselves to another—as an example of an agreement both society and law would refuse to uphold. The problem with selling one's self into slavery is that a person gives up their liberty, thus undermining liberty itself. Furthermore, they might want to exert their liberty later and, in a free society, should be free to end the agreement. Therefore slavery—even when it's willing slavery—cannot exist in free society.

Mill denies the right of the individual to make a long-term commitment to relinquishing their own liberty. A person simply cannot predict the future, and so they cannot definitively know whether they're making a good decision or not. In this case, society can intervene to help protect the individual against themselves, but it also does so to protect the principle of liberty. Nobody should be allowed to undermine liberty because liberty—as well as people—must be protected.

When a person makes a promise or encourages another to rely on their long-term commitment to a course of action, they also create a new series of obligations to that person that don't simply go away, especially if they have an impact on a third party. One example is **marriage**, especially a marriage that involves children. In these cases, even if people are allowed the legal freedom to end their agreement, they may still have a moral obligation to each other or the third party (children). An individual must consider this before entering a long-term agreement, and it is their own moral failing if they don't give proper weight to the obligations towards others that they're creating.

In this passage, Mill seems to acknowledge that ending a marital agreement through divorce should be allowed. This is notable because Mill himself fell in love with a married woman, Harriet. The two got married after Harriet's husband's death, but they might have gotten married years before if only it had been easier for Harriet to get a divorce. Given this context, it's possible that Mill's approval of divorce here may be connected to his personal experience with Harriet.

Mill expresses his belief that while a person is free to make decisions for themselves, they are not generally free to make decisions for others. The State must limit the amount of power one person has over another, but it neglects this duty when it comes to **marriage** and family—husbands exert almost total control over their wives and children. Mill believes this evil can be partially remedied by giving wives the same rights and protections as men, but this is harder to do with children. Fathers are jealous of any interference in their control over their kids. This is evident when it comes to education—according to Mill, most would agree fathers are responsible for their children's education, but few expect fathers to educate their kids. This is an offense against the kids and society, so society is right to interfere and ensure kids are educated, as well as fed and clothed.

It is worthwhile to question whether a society is really free when gender inequality abounds. Women are wholly at the mercy of men, and they have few chances of getting legal protection and even fewer of being treated as man's equal. In this passage, Mill also stresses the fact that people have obligations towards children, namely the obligation to prepare them for their future lives by adequately educating them.

Mill believes that if government would require children to be educated, then it would solve the problem of what to teach them because individual families would be able to choose for themselves which schools their children attend. The only opposition to there being a state educational requirement is that nobody wants the state to control school curriculums. However, Mill devises a system to ensure people are giving their children the education society requires: it involves yearly age-appropriate tests to make sure kids are at least meeting attaining general knowledge, and these tests would only deal in facts, not opinions. Beyond general education, kids may choose to take exams in specialized areas to earn a certificate to prove their ability enter a profession in a certain field. The parents of kids who fail the general tests will have to pay a fine.

Mill focuses on the necessity of universal education because a good education will encourage individuality, critical thinking, and originality. If children are taught to value these things while they're young, then they might carry them over into adulthood, and thus the future generation will be more active and productive than the one which came before. While the system Mill lays out here might seem unreasonable or difficult, he suggests that the benefits will inevitably justify the difficulty society would have in establishing it.


Mill asserts that having a baby is one of the most important actions anyone can take, and to bring a life into the world without having the means to take care of it is a crime against that new life. Mill argues that the laws some countries already have that require people who want to get married to prove they are capable of taking care of a baby do not violate liberty because it is an action of the state meant to prevent a dangerous act that would hurt others. Still, Mill acknowledges that most people would not agree. He explains that this highlights a "strange respect of mankind for liberty" that exists alongside a "strange want of respect for it."

Mill extends his belief of the obligation society and individuals have towards others to the unborn. Having a baby, according to Mill, is a responsibility, and people owe it to their unborn children to make sure they can give them a good life before trying to conceive. However, Mill overlooks one difficulty—the limited control 19th-century couples had over their reproductive lives. Mill says there's a "strange respect of mankind for liberty," meaning most people have an intense love of freedom. On the other hand, their "strange want of respect for it" is meant to highlight that people stop taking liberty very seriously when they're considering someone else's liberty.

The last group of questions Mill addresses involves the topic of whether a government should do something for society's benefit instead of requiring it to take care of itself. One objection to this is that society might be able to help itself better than the government can. Another objection is that it is beneficial for members of a society to do the "particular thing" themselves rather than letting the government do it for them because it will require people to exercise their mental faculties, and it also gives them the chance to explore the value of "joint interests" in society by working with their peers. The final objection includes the argument that letting the government interfere unnecessarily adds to its power and increases its ability to influence individuals in society.

In a representative government, society chooses its leaders. Because of this, it would make sense that the government might feel that it has an obligation to do something to benefit society. However, the question really is whether government is doing society any favors by doing things for it, or if government would better serve society by requiring it to work for its own benefit. It's important for individuals to gain an understanding and appreciation of "joint interests" because it encourages unity without demanding conformity the way public opinion does.

If the government's powers are increased by putting it in charge of things like banks, charities, universities, and railways, it would effectively destroy freedom in that state even if people enjoy liberty of the press and speech. Furthermore, if the greatest minds and talents in society chose to work for government departments instead of other public or private ones, they would cease to work for the greater good of humanity and focus all their abilities and ambitions on advancement within these departments. More importantly, this kind of system would effectively prevent reform that might restore freedom.

Mill believes the best governments have limited power over society because once a government has too much power, it becomes tyrannical. When a government owns most of a state's institutions and resources, it virtually owns its citizens, too. This, of course, is a violation of freedom.

Mill writes that one can find a good example of a strong society in France—in which universal military service has made it so whenever there's an insurrection, there's at least one person capable of taking charge—and in America, where most people are capable of improvising a functioning government in the event the main government collapsed. Mill says this is what a truly free society should be like and a society of this kind of strength and intelligence will never be "enslaved" by external powers. On the other hand, the better the organization of the government, the more subservient politicians are to their organizations. Mill also reminds the reader that when the government attracts all the best thinkers of the country, mental activity and progress will eventually decline as most people fall into a set routine. Because of this, there should be some means of developing ability independent of the government.

The reason Mill believes American and French societies are uniquely free is because they are both remarkably self-sufficient. These societies do not depend on external sources for guidance or protection, but are instead capable of guiding and protecting themselves. Mill also identifies a real threat to a society's progress: if the best thinkers join the government, then they remove themselves from society and take the influence of their presence with them. Once a person is part of a government, they are obligated to do or refrain from doing certain things—they no longer have the same freedom to do and say as they please.

Mill says society must try to determine the point at which evil begins and try to remove the obstacles that hinder society's wellbeing. Mill also argues that it is safest for a society to disseminate power as much as possible and centralize information for distribution. Some officers would be required in all localities to enforce general rules, but beyond those, officers should be trusted to use their own judgment in situations while administrative branches would limit themselves to overseeing the execution of enforcing the law or taking necessary action against those who fail to enforce it. Governments should support activity that stimulates people because the worth of a state is proportional to the worth of the people who make it up. States that "dwarf[]" citizens to make them easier to control will find it difficult to achieve greatness because it lacks "vital power."

When a society disseminates power, it protects itself from the possibility of a single tyrant emerging to take away society's freedom. It also encourages mass political participation by making it easier for average people to see how government works by making it local. More importantly, by centralizing information, a society makes it easier to distribute it and to make sure they have the most well-informed and current data available. In these conditions, a society can thrive and do great things.

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