INTRODUCTION TO THE ABRIDGED *ON LIBERTY*

BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

JOHN STUART MILL (1806–1873)

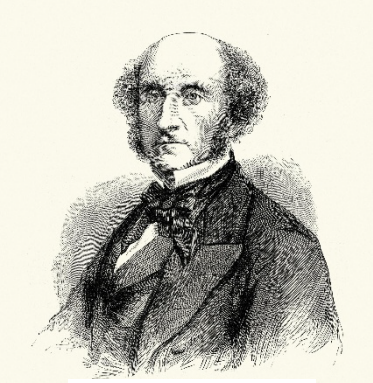

FIG 1 JOHN STUART MILL

John Stuart Mill was one of the most important political philosophers of the nineteenth century and a foundational figure in modern liberal thought. His arguments about freedom of speech, individuality, education, and minority rights continue to shape contemporary debates about democracy and civil liberty. To understand *On Liberty*, however, it is helpful to understand the unusual life and intellectual formation that produced it.

Mill's childhood was famously rigorous. His father, James Mill—a philosopher and close associate of Jeremy Bentham—designed his education as an experiment in rational training grounded in utilitarian principles. Utilitarianism is the ethical theory that actions are right if they promote the greatest overall happiness; unlike Bentham, however, Mill later argued that happiness differs in quality as well as quantity, and that intellectual and moral pleasures are superior to merely physical ones. By the age of three, Mill was learning Greek. By eight, he had begun Latin. Before most children enter secondary school, he had already read large portions of Herodotus, Xenophon, and Plato in the original language. By his early teens, he had studied logic, political economy, and advanced mathematics. He later wrote that he had "no childhood" in the ordinary sense; his education was systematic, relentless, and intellectually ambitious. The goal was not merely knowledge, but the formation of a reformer who would improve society through reason.

This intellectual intensity, however, came at a psychological cost. At age twenty, Mill suffered a profound mental crisis. He asked himself whether he would feel happy if all the social reforms he had been trained to pursue were achieved. His answer was no. The realization plunged him into depression and forced him to reconsider the purely rational and utilitarian system in which he had been raised. Recovery came gradually, aided in part by poetry—especially

Wordsworth—and by a growing recognition that emotional development, imagination, and individuality were essential to human flourishing. This period permanently reshaped his philosophy. *On Liberty* reflects not only logical argument but a deep concern for personal development and the cultivation of character.

Mill's intellectual partnership with Harriet Taylor further influenced his work. Their long collaboration, beginning in friendship and later leading to marriage, sharpened his thinking about individuality, equality, and women's rights. Mill regarded many of his later works, including *On Liberty*, as joint productions in spirit if not in formal authorship. After Harriet's death, he dedicated the book to her, emphasizing the depth of her influence on its arguments.

FIG 2 HARRIET TAYLOR

Unlike many philosophers, Mill was also directly involved in public life. He worked for more than twenty years at the British East India Company, gaining experience in administration and colonial governance. Later, as a Member of Parliament from 1865 to 1868, he advocated positions that were often controversial. He formally proposed an amendment to grant women the right to vote, making him one of the earliest parliamentary supporters of women's suffrage. He defended minority rights, supported Irish land reform, and consistently argued that popular opinion must not override individual liberty. His political career illustrates that *On Liberty* was not an abstract exercise; it was part of a broader commitment to reform grounded in principle.

Mill's concerns were shaped by the historical context of Victorian Britain. By the mid-nineteenth century, representative government had expanded, and traditional monarchical power had declined. Yet Mill feared a new danger: not the tyranny of a king, but the tyranny of the majority. In democratic societies, public opinion could become coercive. Social condemnation, ridicule, and moral pressure might silence dissent just as effectively as law. *On Liberty* is, in large part, a response to this fear. Mill argues that society must protect individuality and free discussion precisely because conformity and unexamined opinion threaten intellectual and moral progress.

These convictions also appear in his reflections on higher education. In his 1867 "Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews," Mill articulated a vision of the university that remains strikingly modern. Education, he argued, should not merely prepare students for professions or technical skill. Its purpose is to cultivate the intellect—to develop disciplined, enlarged minds capable of evaluating competing arguments. A university should expose students to opposing viewpoints, not shield them from controversy. Intellectual maturity requires encountering disagreement and learning to defend one's beliefs rationally. This educational philosophy parallels his defense of free discussion in Chapter II of *On Liberty*: truth emerges through engagement, not insulation.

The abridged version you are reading preserves the core of Mill's argument. In Chapter I, he articulates what has become known as the harm principle: society may restrict individual liberty only to prevent harm to others. In Chapter II, he defends freedom of thought and discussion by

arguing that suppressed opinions may be true, may contain partial truth, and are necessary to keep even accepted truths intellectually alive. Later chapters extend these principles to individuality and to the limits of social authority. While the complete original work includes additional historical illustrations and extended policy applications, the essential argumentative structure remains intact here.

Mill's prose is deliberate and demanding. He defines his terms carefully, builds his claims step by step, and anticipates objections before responding to them. Reading him requires patience and sustained attention, but it also offers a model of rigorous reasoning. His life—marked by intellectual intensity, psychological struggle, public advocacy, and educational reform—helps explain why liberty, individuality, and the defense of dissent became central to his philosophy.

How to Read This Version

This is an abridged edition of *On Liberty*. Some sections have been removed to focus on Mill's central arguments.

- **Asterisks (*)** mark key terms defined in the Study Guide.
- **Ellipses (…)** show where wording has been removed.
- **Italicized summaries** explain large omitted sections.
- Sections labeled **Mill's Text** are his words (with minor abridgment).

Read carefully and distinguish between Mill's argument and the editorial guidance provided to support your understanding.

ON LIBERTY (ABRIDGED)

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER INTENT

Mill establishes the harm principle*: society may exercise power over individuals only to prevent harm* to others. He distinguishes persuasion from compulsion* and argues that the individual is sovereign* over his own body and mind.

FROM ON LIBERTY CHAPTER 1:

1.1 The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion* and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion* of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty* of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm* to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled* to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil, in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be calculated to produce evil to some one else. 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*.

1.2 It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury.

[In the complete original Chapter I, Mill also provides an extended historical overview of the struggle between liberty and authority in ancient republics and modern societies. He discusses how political liberty evolved from protection against rulers to protection against the tyranny of the majority. That broader historical framing is not included in this selection, which focuses directly on the articulation of the harm principle.]

CHAPTER II: OF THE LIBERTY OF THOUGHT AND DISCUSSION

CHAPTER INTENT

In this chapter, Mill argues that liberty* of opinion and discussion must be protected because (1) suppressed opinions may be true, (2) even false opinions contain partial truth, (3) unchallenged truths become prejudice* and dead dogma*, and (4) intellectual vitality depends on the collision* of opposing ideas. Suppression assumes infallibility* and weakens society's capacity for reason.

FROM ON LIBERTY CHAPTER 2:

2.1 THE time, it is to be hoped, is gone by when any defence would be necessary of the "liberty*" of the press as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical* government. No argument, we may suppose, can now be needed, against permitting a legislature or an executive, not identified in interest with the people, to prescribe opinions to them, and determine what doctrines or what arguments they shall be allowed to hear.

2.2 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.

2.3 Were an opinion a personal possession of no value except to the owner; if to be obstructed in the enjoyment of it were simply a private injury, it would make some difference whether the injury was inflicted only on a few persons or on many. 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.

2.4 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*.

2.5 Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any object is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision* of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

2.6 Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice*, with little comprehension or feeling of its

rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma* becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.

2.7 The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful, is the cause of half their errors. A contemporary author has well spoken of “the deep slumber of a decided opinion.”

2.8 In politics, again, it is almost a commonplace, that a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life; until the one or the other shall have so enlarged its mental grasp as to be a party equally of order and of progress, knowing and distinguishing what is fit to be preserved from what ought to be swept away. Each of these modes of thinking derives its utility from the deficiencies of the other; but it is in a great measure the opposition of the other that keeps each within the limits of reason and sanity. Unless opinions favorable to democracy and to aristocracy, to property and to equality, to co-operation and to competition, to luxury and to abstinence, to sociality and individuality, to liberty* and discipline, and all the other standing antagonisms of practical life, are expressed with equal freedom, and enforced and defended with equal talent and energy, there is no chance of both elements obtaining their due; one scale is sure to go up, and the other down.

2.9 We have now recognized the necessity to the mental wellbeing of mankind (on which all their other well-being depends) of freedom of opinion, and freedom of the expression of opinion, on four distinct grounds; which we will now briefly recapitulate.

2.10 First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility*.

2.11 Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may contain a portion of truth; and it is only by the collision* of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

2.12 Thirdly, even if the received opinion be true, unless it is vigorously contested, it will be held as prejudice*, not rational conviction; and the doctrine will risk becoming dogma*, losing its living force.

2.13 In general, opinions contrary to those commonly received can only obtain a hearing by studied moderation of language… while unmeasured vituperation* employed on the side of the prevailing opinion really does deter people from professing contrary opinions… Law and authority have no business with restraining either; opinion ought, in every instance, to determine its verdict by the circumstances of the individual case; condemning every one… in whose mode of advocacy want of candor, or malignity, bigotry*, or intolerance manifest themselves, but not inferring these vices from the side which a person takes.

[In the complete original Chapter II, Mill includes extended historical examples (including religious persecution and political suppression) to illustrate these principles in detail. Those case studies are not included in this selection, though the full four-part logical structure of his defense of free discussion is preserved.]

CHAPTER III: OF INDIVIDUALITY

CHAPTER INTENT

Mill argues that liberty* must extend beyond speech to the development of character. Individuality is essential to human progress. Conformity and the tyranny* of custom produce stagnation and intellectual decline.

FROM ON LIBERTY CHAPTER 3:

The liberty* of the individual must extend beyond freedom of opinion and discussion to 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.

No one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions. On the contrary, even opinions lose their immunity when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such as to constitute their expression a positive instigation to some mischievous act.

But individuality is one of the principal ingredients of well-being; and the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of progress.

That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.

The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement. Custom is there, in all things, the final appeal; justice and right mean conformity to custom.

Genius can breathe more freely in an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, ex vi termini*, more individual than any other people — less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any small number of molds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character.

[In the full original chapter, Mill develops extended reflections on ancient Greek civic life, contrasts it with modern conformity, and elaborates on education, character formation, and social mediocrity. Those extended comparisons and illustrations are not included here, though the central argument about individuality and custom remains intact.]

CHAPTER IV: OF THE LIMITS TO THE AUTHORITY OF SOCIETY

CHAPTER INTENT

Mill clarifies the boundary between self-regarding and other-regarding actions. Society may properly intervene only when harm* to others is at stake. Moral disapproval alone does not justify compulsion*.

FROM ON LIBERTY CHAPTER 4:

What, then, is the rightful limit to the sovereignty* of the individual over himself? Where does the authority of society begin?

The individual is not accountable to society for his actions insofar as these concern only himself. Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance are the only measures by which society can justifiably express its dislike or disapprobation of his conduct.

But if he has infringed the rights of others, or failed in some distinct and assignable obligation to them, he is subject to social or legal punishment.

There is a sphere of action in which society, as distinguished from the individual, has only an indirect interest; comprehending all that portion of a person's life and conduct which affects only himself, or if it also affects others, only with their free, voluntary, and undeceived consent.

When conduct affects the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it.

The distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding actions is not always easy to draw. But unless there is harm* to others, interference is illegitimate.

[In the full chapter, Mill supplies detailed applications involving trade, intoxication, gambling, contracts, public decency, and civic duties. These extended policy illustrations are not included here, though the structural distinction between self-regarding and other-regarding conduct is preserved.]

CHAPTER V: APPLICATIONS

CHAPTER INTENT

Mill applies his principles to political and social life. He warns that majority opinion can become tyrannical* and that social pressure may be as oppressive as formal law.

FROM ON LIBERTY CHAPTER 5:

The tyranny* of the majority is now generally included among the evils against which society requires to be on its guard.

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.

Protection against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling.

The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs.

Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each other to live as seems good to the rest.

[The remainder of this chapter contains detailed examinations of economic regulation, public morality laws, marriage law, and state interference in commerce and education. Those specific case studies are omitted here, though the warning against majority tyranny and overreach remains central.]