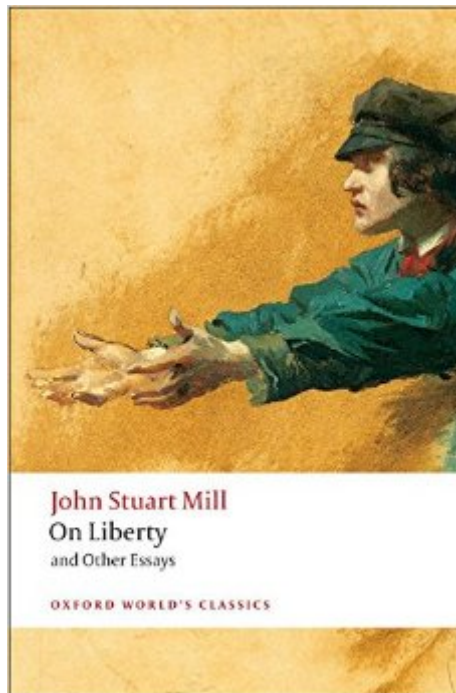


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On Liberty And Other Essays (Oxford World's Classics)



Synopsis

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

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

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Customer Reviews

This Oxford collection of four definitive essays by John Stuart Mill, arguably the most famous Victorian writer who could be called a philosopher, gives an excellent profile of a rigorous social reformer and political thinker. The subjects of these essays--liberty, utilitarianism, government, and women's rights--are interrelated to the extent that they reveal a man with a sharp sense of history and its impact on the methods and mores of contemporary society. Mill, after all, was of Charles

Dickens's generation and therefore witnessed an era in which the British crown was inclined to manifest its power through tyranny in its efforts to maintain a costly worldwide empire. Mill's basic concern is liberty, both social and civil. He identifies a difference between freedom and liberty--freedom is the state of being free, while liberty is the freedom that a government or governing body grants its people. Briefly a member of Parliament (the workings of which are described in great detail in "Representative Government") and heavily informed and influenced by Alexis de Tocqueville's "Democracy in America," Mill recognized that the most important (and perhaps the only proper) function of a government is to protect the liberties of its citizens. However, people generally get the form of government they deserve; if laws they allow to go unchecked become the tools of despotic powers, they have only their own ignorance or indolence to blame. An enumeration of Mill's finer points may suffice as a summary of his ideas:

1. Freedom of the press and freedom of expression are essential rights of man. You don't have to accept as true what other people say, but let them say it because there's always the chance that they're right and you're wrong. Mill points out that even the Roman Catholic Church, most intolerant of religions (his words, not mine), allows a "devil's advocate" to offer repudiative evidence before it canonizes a new saint. He notes instances in which religious intolerance still rears its ugly head in the British Empire of his day.
2. Christianity does not have a monopoly on moral authority; literary history gives evidence of this.
3. Individuality should be fostered so that new ideas may flourish, but society, specifically the middle class, establishes the normative values that unfortunately tend to stifle individuality. You have an unlimited right to your opinion, but you are free to act only so far as you do not harm or molest others. Long before Orwell, Mill had the insight that institutional deprivation of liberty is effectively suppression of thought, for how can someone train himself to think independently when doing so could lead to persecution for heresy or treason?
4. State-sponsored education should restrict itself to teaching scientifically provable or reliably documented facts rather than push religious or political agenda. When or if polemical issues are raised, arguments for and against are to be presented as opinions so that students may draw their own conclusions.
5. The utilitarian principle states that actions that promote happiness (in its most obvious form, pleasure) are "right" and those that reduce happiness are "wrong"--in other words, utilitarianism is the opposite of puritanism. Consider how much better it is to be a dissatisfied human being than a satisfied pig, because the human has the potential for so much more happiness than the pig, whose breadth of experience is contained entirely between the trough and the slaughterhouse, could ever know.
6. Women deserve the same rights as men because the social and mental limitations attributed to women are for the most part a male-conceived artifice. Chivalry is a fallacy. And so on. I'm not sure if

it's correct to call Mill a libertarian in modern terms, but he was certainly concerned with the issues with which modern libertarians are concerned. Much of his discourse is relevant to today's world, even though he often draws upon the past for contrast in order to make his conclusions, the implication being that improvement comes with increased knowledge and experience. Anyone who is interested in nineteenth-century thought on democracy and individualism will find much to ponder in Mill's eloquence.

The editor of this collection states that when read together, the four essays contained in this Oxford World's Classics edition reveal Mill to be an organized thinker on par with Marx. I'm not quite so sure of that, but I will say the collection feels thematically consistent and well thought out. Readers should not be scared off because Mill is considered a "classic" text. The tone of these essays, with the possible exception of "Utilitarianism" is pretty light, and Mill even occasionally makes an effort to crack a joke. In "On Liberty" and "Utilitarianism" we see an abstract breakdown of his belief structure where he tries to answer questions like, "When is it justified for government to interfere in individuals lives?" and "What is the overarching goal of society?" After he attempts to answer these questions he gets more specific by applying the principles to how government should operate in "Representative Government" and in "The Subjection of Women". Some concepts now outdated, but on the whole, still a relatively strong argument. It is particularly frustrating to see Mill talking about proportional representation in "Representative Government" and knowing that the logic of that argument has still not made much headway here in the United States well over a hundred years later. Mill's systematic thinking makes this collection worth owning.

It is surprising to me how many people assume that 'On Liberty' was written before or during the American Revolution - Mill was certainly influenced by the spirit of American liberty, which was variously romanticised and adapted in Britain and Europe during the nineteenth century. Published in 1859, 'On Liberty' is one of the primary political texts of the nineteenth century; perhaps only the writings of Marx had a similar impact, and of the two, in today's world, Mill's philosophy seems (please note that I only said 'seems') the one that is triumphant. One of the interesting ideas behind 'On Liberty' is that this may in fact be more the inspiration of Harriet Taylor (later Mrs. J.S. Mill) than of Mill himself; Taylor wrote an essay on Toleration, most likely in 1832, but it remained unpublished until after her death. F.A. Hayek (free-market economist and philosopher) noticed this connection. Whether this was the direct inspiration or not, the principles are similar, and the Mills were rather united in their views about liberty. 'On Liberty' is more of an extended essay than a book - it isn't very

long. It relates as a political piece to his general Utilitarianism and political reform ideology. A laissez faire capitalist in political economy, his writing has been described as 'improved Adam Smith' and 'popularised Ricardo'. Perhaps it is in part the brevity of 'On Liberty' that gives it an enduring quality. There are five primary sections to the text. The introduction sets the stage philosophically and historically. He equates the histories of classical civilisations (Greece and Rome) with his contemporary England, stating that the struggle between liberty and authority is ever present and a primary feature of society. He does not hold with unbridled or unfettered democracy, either (contrary to some popular readings of his text) - he warns that the tyranny of the majority can be just as dangerous and damaging toward a society as any individual or oligarchic despotism. Mill looks for a liberty that permits individualism; thus, while democracy is an important feature for Mill, there must be a system of checks and balances that ensures individual liberties over and against this kind of system. All of these elements receive further development in subsequent sections. The second section of the text is 'Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion'. Freedom of speech and expression is an important aspect here. Mill presents a somewhat radical proposition that even should the government and the people be in complete agreement with regard to coercive action, it would still be an illegitimate power. This is an important consideration in today's world, as governments and people contemplate the curtailment of civil liberties in favour of increased security needs. The possibility of fallibility, according to Mill, makes the power illegitimate, and (again according to Mill) it doesn't matter if it affects many or only a few, people today or posterity. It is still wrong. Mill develops this argument largely by using the history of religious ideas and religious institutions, in addition to the political (since the two were so often inter-related). The third section is perhaps the best known and most quoted, 'Of Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being'. It is perhaps a natural consequence of Enlightenment thinking that individuality over communal and corporate identity would dominate. Our world today goes back and forth between individual and communal identities (nationality, regionality, employment, church affiliation, school affiliation, sports teams, etc.). Mill's ideas of individual are very modern, quite at home with the ideas of modern political and civil individuality, with all of the responsibilities. Mill states, 'No one pretends that actions should be as free as opinions.' He recognises the increased limitations on individual liberty given that we do live in communal settings, but this does not hinder the idea of individuality and individual liberty, particularly as it pertains to thoughts and speech. Mill explores various ideas of personal identity and action (medieval, Calvinist, etc.) to come up with an idea of individuality that is rather modern; of course, this is political personhood that pre-dates the advent of psychology/psychoanalytic theory that will give rise to a lot more confusion for the role of identity and personhood in society. The fourth

primary section looks theoretically at the individual in community, 'Of the Limits to the Authority of Society Over the Individual'; the final section looks at specific applications. Mill discounts the idea of social contract while maintain that there is a mutual responsibility between individuals and community. Mill looks at the Temperance movements and laws as an example of bad laws (not only from the aspect of curtailment of liberty, but also for impractical aspects of enforcement); in similar examples, Mill looks at the role of society in regulating the life of the individual, calling on good government to always err on the side of the individual. Mill puts it very directly -- Individuals are accountable only to themselves, unless their actions concern the interests of society at large. Few in the Western world would argue with this today; however, we still live in a world where 'thought police' are feared, and 'political correctness' is debated as appropriate or not with regard to individual liberties. Mill wrote extensively beyond this text, in areas of philosophy (logic, religion, ethics). The particular text here includes other essays of interest: 'Utilitarianism', 'Considerations on Representative Government', and 'The Subjection of Women', and also has a useful bibliography and index. The essay on Utilitarianism is one of the more contentious works of Mill; the later two contain ideas well ahead of their time, and many parts can be seen at work in modern democracies. This should probably be required reading in civics classes, if not in the pre-university years for students, then certainly in the early university years.

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