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On Liberty (Annotated)



Synopsis

Edited, with Editor's Introduction, by Elizabeth Rapaport. Contents include a selected bibliography and an editor's Introduction that provides a brief sketch of the historical, social, and biographical context in which Mill wrote and also traces the central line of argument in the text to aid in the comprehension of the essay's structure, method, and major theses.

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Customer Reviews

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was interested in the nature of Civil Liberty, and the limits to the power that a Government can legitimately exercise upon its citizens. He believed that some worrying tendencies could be observed in the England society of his time, and tried to warn others about them. The author basically explains his ideas regarding the preservation of individual liberties, not only due to the fact that they are rights owed to everyone, but also because they benefit society as a whole. For example, when he says that liberty of thought and of discussion must be preserved, he tells us that "Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but fact and

arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it". How can mistaken beliefs or actions be proven wrong, if dissent is forbidden?. The loss for society is clear: "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". In order to preserve the liberties included in the concept of Civil Liberty, the author points out that there must be limits to the action of the Government. He says 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". Any other reason is simply not good enough. Thus, Stuart Mill highlights the rights of the individual, but also the limit to those rights: the well-being of others. "On Liberty" is not too long, and I think you are highly likely to enjoy it, if you can get past the first few pages.

This Kindle edition has an introduction written more than a century ago that offers no insight into Mill's essay and deals almost entirely with the relationship between Mill and Harriet Taylor. It is therefore primarily of general rather than academic interest. "On Liberty" is one of the most important books on political thought of the nineteenth century. Fortunately for the 21st century reader it is also one of the most accessible. Mill was a libertarian who chose not to base his defence of liberty on natural rights but on his own revised version of utilitarianism: "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions...grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being." This enables Mill to argue that freedom is needed if man is to be able to explore all the avenues of human development that allow the human race to progress. Total freedom is impossible so what determines the legitimate boundaries of freedom? Mill distinguishes between self-regarding and other-regarding actions. The former should never be interfered with and the latter subject to limitation only if they harm the legitimate rights of others. For Mill free thought is a self-regarding action which should not be curtailed, and free thought is virtually useless without free speech. Mill then proceeds to add a utilitarian argument in favour of free speech: if an opinion is silenced then mankind is necessarily the loser whether the opinion is true or false. He advances a number of arguments to support this, concluding with the claim that a climate of freedom is essential for "great thinkers" and "it is as much, and even more indispensable to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature they are capable of."

In his classic essay "On Liberty", John Stuart Mill deals with the issue of "civil liberties" -not the metaphysical issue of "free will". While most attacks on civil liberties have historically occurred from

the right within the context of a tyrannical or an aristocratic rule, Mill deals with threats against liberty from within the institutions of democracy itself. The issue is especially relevant at a time when widespread domestic wiretapping and surveillance violates the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The aim of early libertarians was to limit the power of the ruler over those governed; Mill, however, identifies a need to limit the power of elected governments and officials as well. Mill is not merely addressing the issue of "who should rule?", he seeks to establish limits on the power that government may exercise over minorities and individuals. His work is more relevant now than ever. While "government of the people" is an ideal to be aspired to, Mill argues that such an ideal is often not the case in fact. He argues that those exerting the power of the government -elected officials, bureaucrats, the judiciary -often develop their own interests. They are sometimes influenced by those constituencies in ways that are at odds with the interests and liberties of individuals or other groups. Mill makes no distinction between a tyranny of one and a tyranny of many. A tyrannical majority running roughshod over the rights of individuals and minorities is no less a tyrant because it is a majority, because it is elected, or because it is elected by a majority.

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