



On Liberty

John Stuart Mill (1806 - 1873)

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In 1854 John Stuart Mill began a short essay on the relationship of authority and liberty. Five years later he published *On Liberty*, a treatise that remains one of the most articulate and influential works on the subject. The central idea is that an individual should be free to pursue his own interests so long as the resulting action does not harm the interests of others. He defines three basic liberties: freedom of thought, emotion and expression; freedom to pursue one's tastes, however vulgar or immoral; and freedom to associate with others. He proposes three reasons to justify resistance to government actions: if private agents can perform an action better than government; if the action benefits the agents even when the government is qualified; and, if the

action adds to the power of government so that it becomes over-reaching or creates dependency in its subjects. The last chapter defines two maxims: "first, that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself", and "that for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable, and may be subjected either to social or to legal punishment, if society is of opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection". The book was immensely popular when published and continues to appeal due to its lucid analysis, accessible prose and compelling model of society. To this day a copy of the book is held by the president of the British Liberal Party as a symbol of office.

John Stuart Mill (May 20, 1806 – May 8, 1873) was an English philosopher, economist and civil servant who made major contributions to the disciplines of social theory, political economy and political theory. He was the eldest son of Scottish economist and historian James. A precocious child, he was raised in isolation from other children and given a rigorous academic education to foster a genius intellect. By age 10 he was fluent in Greek and Latin and had read the classics as well studied arithmetic, history, physics and chemistry. The Mills were closely connected to the Utilitarianism movement of Jeremy Bentham. As such, Mill was a non-conformist and did not swear allegiance to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England and so was unable to study at Cambridge or Oxford. He joined the British East India Company at age 17 and worked in political relations with the princely states for 35 years until the company was abolished in favor of direct rule in 1858. His experience was instrumental in his defense of British imperialism as a benevolent despotism necessary to govern barbarous peoples. After 21 years of friendship he married the brilliant Harriet Taylor when her husband died. She is said to have been a co-contributor to *On Liberty* and a strong influence in his advocacy of women's rights. He served as a Member of Parliament from 1865-1868, where he was the first to call for women's suffrage. Considered by some to be the most influential English-speaking philosopher of the nineteenth century, it is fitting that he was godfather to Bertrand Russell. Fond of visits to France since age 14, he died at Avignon of an infection at age 66.