

For class on Thursday, February 27th

John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty” – Oxford World’s Classics edition pgs. 1-112

Comprehension Questions & Things to Keep in Mind

- How has the struggle between Liberty and Authority changed over time, according to Mill? Is he satisfied with the current state of ‘people power’? How are the likings, dislikings, and customs of any age or society formed? What is Mill’s *one very simple principle* of how much liberty we should have? Who does this principle apply to/who is allowed to exercise that liberty? When should we be held accountable to others? Why is he going to focus henceforth on the liberty of Thought?
- For what reasons is the suppression of thought illegitimate? Why should we not suppress ‘incorrect’ thought, and why does Mill advocate keeping an open mind? Why is the idea that truth will always triumph over persecution a “pleasant falsehood”? How does Mill see the persecution of ideas still spilling over into 19th-century society, after his many historical examples? How do stigma and social intolerance function to suppress thought? Why is free discussion crucial to maintain freedom of thought, and why does a lack of debate make doctrines weak? What service(s) do discussion and the existence of multiple opinions do for attempts to discover the truth of any matter? What criticisms does he have of Christian doctrine on this point? What *conditions* should we nevertheless apply to the exercise of free discussion?
- Are we as free to act as we are to think? Why, or why not? When should individuality assert, or not assert itself? How should we choose our path in life? What is the relationship between individuality and development? What are Mill’s opinions of originality and genius? How does he write about difference? Why is custom a sort of despotism? How does he compare Europe to other places in this respect?
- What basic tenets about society does Mill lay out? What rights does the individual have in society, and what, on the contrary, should we not be able to do (what are our duties vs. our punishable vices)? What should happen if a person’s exercise of individuality harms society at large? Compare this to Mill’s essential principle. Why should the majority opinion not interfere with minority opinion/conduct? Do his example situations bear out his principles? Are you surprised or do you agree/disagree with any of them in particular?
- Why is it not legitimate, at the start of Ch. 5, for the potential for damage or even real damage caused to justify interference? Compare this again to the essential principle – is Mill being consistent? (Think about the implied definitions of ‘damage’ and ‘harm.’) What examples does he give here from the world of trade and economics? What distinction does he draw between private and public harm/damage? What examples of excessive liberty does he condemn? What are his key objections to government interference?

Extra Reading/Listening/Watching for Context

[Biography of John Stuart Mill](#) (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

[The History of Utilitarianism](#) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Adam Gopnik, “[Right Again: The Passions of John Stuart Mill.](#)” *The New Yorker*, 10/6/2008