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Mill’s Harm Principle and On Liberty

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Mill’s Harm Principle and On Liberty

How far can society control what you do with your own life? Many people think the answer is: when they disapprove. John Stuart Mill disagreed.

He set out one simple test for when interference is allowed. This lesson explains the test, the reasons behind it, and where it stops.

The idea in brief

- **Harm principle:** society may force a person only to stop harm to others.
- **Self-regarding conduct:** actions that mostly affect only the person who does them.
- **Paternalism:** controlling someone “for their own good”. Mill rejects it for adults.
- **Free speech:** silencing even one opinion is wrong, because no one is always right.
- **Individuality:** people should be free to try different ways of living.



John Stuart Mill, who wrote On Liberty in 1859. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

Who Was John Stuart Mill?

Who was Mill?

John Stuart Mill (1806–73) was the most influential English language philosopher of the nineteenth century. He was a naturalist, a utilitarian and a liberal.

He was born on 20 May 1806 in Pentonville, then a northern suburb of London. His father, James Mill, was a friend and ally of Jeremy Bentham.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

How was he educated?

His father taught him hard and early. Mill began Greek at age three and Latin at age eight.

By age twelve he had absorbed most of the classical canon. At age twenty he suffered a “mental crisis” and began to question the narrow creed he was raised in.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

> **Quick check 1.** Mill began learning Greek at age three. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What else did he do?

Mill worked for the East India Company for almost thirty-five years. In 1865 he was elected Member of Parliament for Westminster.

In Parliament he championed unpopular causes, including the extension of suffrage to women. He lost his seat in 1868.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

Which books matter here?

His most important works include *System of Logic* (1843), *On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1861) and *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy* (1865).

This lesson is about *On Liberty*.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

The Harm Principle

What is the harm principle?

The aim of *On Liberty* is one very simple principle. Society may interfere with a person's liberty of action only for self-protection.

In short: power may be used over any member of a civilised community, against his will, only to prevent harm to others.

Sources: gutenberg.org; plato.stanford.edu

Is "their own good" a reason to force someone?

No. A person's own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient reason.

A person cannot rightly be forced to act because it will make him happier. Nor can he be forced because others think it wise or right. These are good reasons to argue with him, but not to compel him.

Sources: gutenberg.org

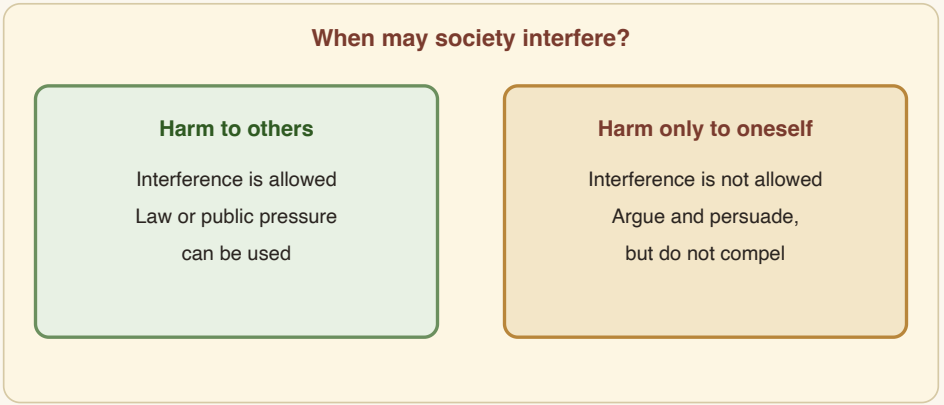
> **Quick check 2.** Under Mill's harm principle, society may force an adult to act simply because it is good for him. *(True or False?)*
>
> See answer ↓

What does “sovereign” mean here?

Over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

This applies only to people in the maturity of their faculties. It is not meant for children or young people below the legal age of adulthood.

Sources: gutenberg.org



Mill’s test: harm to others can justify interference; a person’s own good cannot.

Self-Regarding Conduct

What is self-regarding conduct?

Some actions mainly affect the person who does them. Others affect different people. Interference with the first kind “for their own good” is paternalism.

No conduct affects only the person who acts. “No person is an entirely isolated being.”

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

Where is the line drawn?

The line falls where a person violates a distinct and assignable obligation to another person. Then the action becomes other-regarding.

So the test is not whether others dislike the act. It is whether the act wrongs or harms someone else.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

Can a private act still affect other people?

Mill knew that no person is wholly cut off from others.

He said a person who harms himself may also hurt those close to him.

But he held that this does not make the act a public matter. The state may step in only when the person breaks a clear duty to someone else.

A man who spends his money on drink, for example, harms only himself. If he fails to pay his debts, he breaks a duty to others, and the law may act.

Sources: gutenberg.org

What if an act hurts others?

Then there is a *prima facie* case for punishing the person, by law, or by public disapproval where law cannot reach.

Control over a person's free choices is allowed only for actions that concern other people.

Sources: gutenberg.org

> **Quick check 3.** Some conduct affects only the person who does it. The state should not forbid it just because others disapprove. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Type of action	Mill's view
Harms other people	Society may interfere, by law or public disapproval.
Mainly affects only the doer	Society may argue and persuade, but not compel.
Done by a child	The doctrine is not meant to apply.

What is paternalism, and what is legal moralism?

Paternalism means limiting a person's choices "for their own good".

Mill's harm principle argues against exactly this.

Legal moralism is a different idea. It says the law may ban an act only because society finds it immoral, even if the act harms no one else.

Mill's principle rejects that view too. Exams often ask students to tell these three ideas apart.

Sources: gutenberg.org

Mill on Free Speech

Why protect even one dissenting voice?

Suppose all mankind but one held the same opinion. Mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he would be in silencing mankind.

So the number of people against an opinion does not decide whether it may be silenced.

Sources: gutenberg.org

Why is silencing an opinion a mistake?

To assume a view is false, and so should be suppressed, is to assume infallibility. But human beings cannot have infallible knowledge.

All our beliefs must stay open to revision in light of further observation. So discussion must remain open, even on issues that seem settled.

Sources: plato.stanford.edu

What is a “dead dogma”?

Mill says an opinion must be discussed fully, often and without fear. If it is not, people hold it as a dead dogma, not a living truth.

A dead dogma is a belief that people repeat without knowing why it is true.

So even a true opinion needs challenge. Open debate keeps it alive.

Sources: gutenberg.org

What are Mill's reasons for free discussion?

Mill gives four reasons. First, the silenced opinion may be true. Second, it may hold a part of the truth, because the ruling opinion is seldom the whole truth.

Third, even a true opinion becomes a mere prejudice if nobody challenges it. Fourth, the meaning of the belief itself may be lost or weakened.

Sources: gutenberg.org

> **Quick check 4.** An opinion may be silenced if nearly everyone disagrees with it. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Individuality and the Majority

What is the tyranny of the majority?

The "tyranny of the majority" is now counted among the evils society must guard against.

It works not only through public authorities. When society itself is the tyrant, it can press on people through opinion and custom.

Sources: gutenberg.org

Why should people try different ways of living?

There should be different experiments of living. Free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others.

The worth of different modes of life should be proved in practice, when anyone thinks fit to try them.

Sources: gutenberg.org

Exam Traps

Do not mix up the two books. *Utilitarianism* (1861) is about happiness. *On Liberty* (1859) is about the limits of interference.

Also remember the harm principle protects adults. Harm means harm to others, not mere offence or disapproval.

Quick Q&A

- Which book states the harm principle? On Liberty (1859).
- When may society force an adult? To prevent harm to others.
- Is “their own good” enough? No.
- Why protect dissent? Humans are fallible.

Practice MCQs

1. According to Mill's harm principle, when may power be rightfully exercised over a member of a civilised community against his will?

A. To make him happier

B. To improve his moral character

C. To follow majority opinion

D. To prevent harm to others

See answer ↓

2. In which year was Mill's On Liberty published?

A. 1843

B. 1861

C. 1859

D. 1865

See answer ↓

3. What does Mill say about a person's own good as a reason for compelling them?

A. It is not a sufficient warrant

B. It is warranted by majority vote

C. It is the main warrant

D. It is warranted only for the poor

See answer ↓

4. Why does Mill say suppressing an opinion assumes infallibility?

A. Because truth is decided by vote

B. Because humans cannot have infallible knowledge, and beliefs stay open to revision

C. Because the state is never wrong

D. Because all opinions are equally true

See answer ↓

5. Mill's statement that the individual is sovereign over his own body and mind applies to whom?

A. Children only

B. Everyone including young persons

C. People in the maturity of their faculties

D. Only legislators

See answer ↓

6. What did Mill call the danger of society pressing on individuals through its majority opinion?

A. The tyranny of the majority

B. The veil of ignorance

C. The categorical imperative

D. The general will

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.**
   The only purpose is to prevent harm to others. His own good is not a sufficient warrant.
   ↑ Q1
2. **C.**
   On Liberty appeared in 1859. Utilitarianism followed in 1861.
   ↑ Q2
3. **A.**
   A person cannot rightfully be compelled because it will be better for him or make him happier.
   ↑ Q3
4. **B.**
   Assuming a view is false and so should be suppressed treats one's own beliefs as certain.
   ↑ Q4
5. **C.**
   The doctrine is meant for human beings in the maturity of their faculties, not children.
   ↑ Q5
6. **A.**
   He listed the tyranny of the majority among the evils society must guard against.
   ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** His father started his education very early. Greek began at three and Latin at eight. ↑ 1
2. **False.** A person's own good is not a sufficient reason. Force is allowed only to prevent harm to others. ↑ 2
3. **True.** That is the point of the self-regarding category. Disapproval alone is not harm. ↑ 3
4. **False.** He argued the opposite. Even if all mankind but one held an opinion, silencing that one person would not be justified. ↑ 4

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