

Reading and Discussion Questions: John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

The reading questions are aimed to help focus your attention on the more important aspects of Mill's thought, either generally or specific to this class. *I want you to go through the reading with these questions, noting in the margins of your text where Mill is address a given question.* So when we are in class if I want to talk about a given question, you will have no problem finding in the text where you think Mill is engaging the issue at hand.

Some things to think about and/or keep in mind as you read Mill:

- Mill distinguishes between limitations on liberty that come from government and those that come from society more generally.
- Mill identifies two distinct kinds of enforcement mechanisms for social rules--law as enforced by the state's officials, and custom as an enforcement mechanism.
- Mill is always concerned with the relationship between the society *as a group* on the one hand and its members severally *as individuals* on the other hand; further, he is concerned with the impact the former has on the latter.

Chapter One: Introductory (pp. 43-51):

1. What is the subject of the essay? With what is he contrasting the subject of the essay?
2. For what reason does Mill think an essay on this topic is needed in his day, especially when he acknowledges that the issue is hardly a new one?
3. What was the earliest conception of political or civil liberty? (Note that Mill specifies just what is supposed to be the main threat to liberty in a general sense--what is it? What was the assumption about the rulers in these early conceptions of political or civil liberty? In what two ways was this sort of liberty achieved or pursued?
4. What is the next stage in the development of political liberty? What is the relationship between the ruled and the rulers, and how does this affect the objectives the people sought in question 3 above?
5. What is Mill's point when he discusses the phrase "self-government" or "the power of people over themselves"? Why is this significant? (You must examine the paragraph in which this discussion takes place AND the PRECEDING paragraph in order to make full sense of Mill's point here.)
6. What is or are the differences between early threats to liberty (what Mill associates with tyranny in government) and those threats associated with "tyranny of the majority"?
7. Mill relies upon a distinction between society as represented in its political system ('functionaries') and society as simply the collective that makes up the public. What is 'social tyranny' and why is it more dangerous than tyranny practiced by society's political office holders or law enforcers?
8. What is the "principal [practical] question in human affairs"? What does Mill mean when he says it is the 'principal' question?
9. From the bottom of 47 to the bottom of 51, Mill speaks about the effects of custom on persons' judgment and the use of reason. In this long section, what would you say is his central point? What is Mill's concern? Here is a hint: one of reason's chief functions is to determine what principle or what standard we ought to use to determine where society, whether through its government or through custom, ought to have authority in the lives of individuals.

10. What is the OBJECT of Mill's essay? (The subject—what the essay is about—is social or civil liberty, as we saw in the first paragraph of chapter one; the question here about the essay's object asks what Mill takes to be the object or objective of the work—the main assertion of the essay. Does it cover what the law ought to be? Does it cover anything beyond the law?)
11. Mill's central principle is often referred to as the "Harm Principle" or the "Harm to Others Principle". To what sort of societies does this principle apply?
12. Does Mill think that democratic self-rule is ALWAYS justified? If not what other sort of political rule is justified and under what conditions? When should despotism give way to self-rule?
13. Mill distinguishes between rights as a possible foundation for this view and utility as a foundation for his view. Mill rejects rights as an abstract foundation (for Mill, rights cannot be a foundation, though they can and do appear in his view as derived from something foundational—utility), and opts instead for utility, which essentially means maximized overall human happiness. What do Mill's remarks about utility as the foundation for his view convey about his understanding of human well-being?
14. Mill obviously defends a view that recognizes a wide range of freedom for individuals. Still, the harm principle implies that individuals are *not* entirely free to do as they wish. Aside from being obligated to refrain from harming others, what other things may individuals be compelled to do, either by law or by custom?
15. What comprises the "appropriate region of human liberty"? (Mill specifies three things; cf. this with the titles of chapters 2 through 4.)
16. Mill refers to a disposition on the part of humans, whether as rulers or as fellow citizens, to impose their opinions and inclinations on others. What does Mill think is the chief impediment or obstacle to their success in this endeavor? Why is Mill worried that this is the chief impediment?