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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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Utilitarianism

Customer Reviews

I have read Mill's On Liberty three times now. The Bromwich and Kateb version is the most helpful, as we not only get to read Mill's essay, but 6 supplementary essays - two "introductions" and four sometimes critical "reinterpretations" by respected theorists. Mill's basic point is simple: people should be left free to think and do as they please unless what they are doing causes actual harm to others. Mill's essay is spent both giving reasons for this principle, and exploring what the principle means in practice. He offers a plurality of reasons for his libertarian ideas, some utilitarian in nature

and some based on (what some might call) natural law. Not only does freedom of action and thought encourage innovation, keep public discussion vigorous, and lead to a more effective social network than government incursion, but people just plain prefer directing their own lives to being directed from outside. Mill gets into sticky territory, however, when he talks about the libertarian principle in concrete terms, as his distinction between what is private and what is public is often less clear than he might want. Should persons be free to tell others to do harm to themselves? Yes. Should parents be free not to educate their children? No. Should "vice-merchants" like bars, gambling parlors, and pornographers be free to conduct business without heavy government regulation? No. Should people be free to marry a plurality of spouses? If mormon, yes. If British, no. My biggest criticism - and a criticism offered in Richard Posner and Jeane Bethke Elshtain's essays - is that Mill is all over the map when his principle is "put to the real world" because the distinction between public and private is just plain fuzzy. Another interesting criticism, brought up in Elshtain's essay, is that Mill demonstrates a very unjustified bias in favor of experiment over tradition (where the former seems always presumed inferior to the latter). In short, I like Mill's essay but see it as an edifice built on not-quite-solid sand. Mill relies on separate categories, public and private, that are just not clear and distinct enough to be distinct. (While Dewey may have gone too far in the "all acts are social" direction, I think Dewey hit closer to the truth.) This is why the six supplementary essays in this edition are a nice touch.

Amazing insight into the human condition with regard to thought processes, how one's ego can convince the mind that it is the only acceptable opinion. Appearing to have been in print for over a hundred and fifty years the author had an incredible clarity in explaining how the body politic encouraged opposing views in that day and age. The purpose of which was to sound out the reasoning of each opinion. Today this man would be heckled off the stage or assaulted for disagreeing with the far left, if that were to be the case. A mind opener for sure

J.S. Mill can be characterized as a proto-libertarian. It's really amazing how incredibly tolerant he was given the times. While the Russians were carrying out pogroms against Jews because of their intolerance, Mill was able to provide an intellectual defense for tolerating the emerging Latter Day Saints (despite his obvious dislike for them). The beauty of this book is that the arguments are still relevant and directly applicable to the issues. Whereas Marx required armies of Soviet intellectuals in order to stay relevant, you can pick up *On Liberty* and fully appreciate the arguments. While it can be tempting to accept some infringements on liberty, I think it's necessary to have a philosophical

framework through which to understand what limitations on liberty are justifiable and which aren't. Jorge

Mill Takes the Utilitarian approach and as such leaves a few holes in his philosophy. At one point he made the claim that a person could be rightfully punished for not fulfilling their civil duty. However I must ask what is your civil duty? whatever the majority decide? your state, or your "Democracy" could ask anything of you and call it your civil duty. This leaves a void wide open for abuse.

This should be required reading before getting a high school diploma. It gives the foundational thinking that led our Founding Fathers to break with England and create our country.

When I began reading this book, I thought I would be unable to understand. But after I actually started to get into the book I realized how important and insightful Mill's ideas are. This book should be required reading for all citizens lucky enough to live in democracies. Mill makes you think about ideas, individuals, and governments. This book certainly ranks as one of the greatest books ever written on the subject of liberty.

give me a break, this has been written a long time ago by Greek and Roman philosophers.

This book is an absolute "must read" for anyone studying political philosophy. The classical liberal writings of JSM, particularly with regard to freedom of speech, are as relevant today as it was in the mid-19th century.

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