

ON LIBERTY

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INTRODUCTION

JOHN STUART MILL (1806-73) was born in London. the son of James Mill the historian, and, thanks to his *Autobiography* (1873), we know every detail of his busy life. Few books are so completely simple-minded and sincere. The precocity of his childhood was the direct consequence of his father's unique theories of education. Beginning Greek in his fourth year, from eight to thirteen his attentions were divided between conic sections and Newton, astronomy and fluxions, logic and political economy; and there does not appear to have been a moment of his waking life given up to idleness or recreation. His appointment in 1823 to the examiner's office at the India House gave him a profession which allowed him ample leisure for his own work. From thirty-five to forty he owned and practically edited the *London Review*, soon incorporated with the *Westminster Review*, where he became the prophet of the philosophical Radicals. His *System of Logic* was published in 1842, and five years later appeared *The Principles of Political Economy*. Both volumes were epoch-making, and both remain classics, even though philosophy has not moved in the direction he anticipated.

It was Mill's peculiar distinction that, though severely scientific, he was always human and popular. He was animated by a genuine desire for the public good, and his later years were devoted to social service and political reform. Writings like *Liberty* (1859), *Representative Government* (1861), and *The Subjection of Women* (1869) were

in effect topical pamphlets; but in many ways they are the most perfect in form of his productions. Mill's was a mind of superlative honesty and of a conscientiousness which became a sort of ardour. Few writers have treated of topics so dry and of dogma so cold with anything approaching his sensitive freshness and glowing humanity. The periodical attacks of depression from which he suffered never clouded his work, and his austere rationalism cannot hide his tenderness towards mankind.

—*Buchan's History of English Literature*

MILL'S OWN WORDS ABOUT “ON LIBERTY”

During the two years which immediately preceded the cessation of my official life, my wife and I were working together at the ‘Liberty.’ I had first planned and written it as a short essay in 1854. It was in mounting the steps of the Capitol, in January, 1855, that the thought first arose of converting it into a volume. None of my writings have been either so carefully composed, or so sedulously corrected as this. After it had been written as usual twice over, we kept it by us, bringing it out from time to time, and going through it *de novo*, reading, weighing, and criticising every sentence. Its final revision was to have been a work of the winter of 1858-9, the first after my retirement, which we had arranged to pass in the South of Europe. That hope and every other were frustrated by the most unexpected and bitter calamity of her death—at Avignon, on our way to Montopellier, from a sudden attack of pulmonary congestion.

* * * *

The ‘Liberty’ was more directly and literally our joint production than anything else which bears my name, for there was not a sentence of it which was not several times gone through by us together, turned over in many ways, and carefully weeded of any faults, either in thoughts or expression, that we detected in it.

* * * *

The 'Liberty' is likely to survive longer than anything else that I have written (with the possible exception of the 'Logic'), because the conjunction of her mind with mine has rendered it a kind of philosophic text-book of a single truth, which the changes progressively taking place in modern society tend to bring out into ever stronger relief: the importance, to man and society, of a large variety in types of character, and of full freedom to human nature to expand itself in innumerable and conflicting directions.

—*Quoted from the author's Autobiography.*

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ON LIBERTY



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

THE subject of this Essay is not the so-called Liberty of the Will, so unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of Philosophical Necessity ; but Civil or Social Liberty : the nature
5 and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. A question seldom stated, and hardly ever discussed, in general terms, but which profoundly influences the practical controversies of
10 the age by its latent presence, and is likely soon to make itself recognised as the vital question of the future. It is so far from being new that, in a certain sense, it has divided mankind almost from the remotest ages ; but in
15 the stage of progress into which the more civilised portions of the species have now entered it presents itself under new conditions, and requires a different and more fundamental treatment.

The struggle between Liberty and Authority is the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar, particularly in that of Greece, Rome, and England. But in old times this contest was between subjects, or some classes of subjects, and the Government. By liberty was meant protection against the tyranny of the political rulers. The rulers were conceived (except in some of the popular Governments of Greece) as in a necessarily antagonistic position to the people whom they ruled. They consisted of a governing One, or a governing tribe or caste, who derived their authority from inheritance or conquest, who, at all events, did not hold it at the pleasure of the governed, and whose supremacy men did not venture, perhaps did not desire, to contest, whatever precautions might be taken against its oppressive exercise. Their power was regarded as necessary, but also as highly dangerous—as a weapon which they would attempt to use against their subjects, no less than against external enemies. To prevent the weaker members of the community from being preyed upon by innumerable vultures, it was needful that there should be an animal of prey stronger

than the rest commissioned to keep them down. But as the king of the vultures would be no less bent upon preying on the flock than any of the minor harpies, it was indispensable to be in
5 a perpetual attitude of defence against his beak and claws. The aim, therefore, of patriots was to set limits to the power which the ruler should be suffered to exercise over the community; and this limitation was what they
10 meant by liberty. It was attempted in two ways. First, by obtaining a recognition of certain immunities, called political liberties or rights, which it was to be regarded as a breach of duty in the ruler to infringe, and which, if he did
15 infringe, specific resistance, or general rebellion, was held to be justifiable. A second, and generally a later, expedient was the establishment of constitutional checks, by which the consent of the community, or of a body of some
20 sort, supposed to represent its interests, was made a necessary condition to some of the more important acts of the governing power. To the first of these modes of limitation the ruling power, in most European countries, was com-
25 pelled, more or less, to submit. It was not so with the second; and, to attain this—or, when

already in some degree possessed, to attain it more completely — became everywhere the principal object of the lovers of liberty. And so long as mankind were content to combat one enemy by another, and to be ruled by a master, 5 on condition of being guaranteed more or less efficaciously against his tyranny, they did not carry their aspirations beyond this point.

A time, however, came, in the progress of human affairs, when men ceased to think it a 10 necessity of nature that their governors should be an independent power, opposed in interest to themselves. It appeared to them much better that the various magistrates of the State should be their tenants or delegates, revocable at their 15 pleasure. In that way alone, it seemed, could they have complete security that the powers of government would never be abused to their disadvantage. By degrees this new demand for elective and temporary rulers became the promi- 20 nent object of the exertions of the popular party, wherever any such party existed; and superseded, to a considerable extent, the previous efforts to limit the power of rulers. As the struggle proceeded for making the ruling power 25 emanate from the periodical choice of the ruled,

some persons began to think that too much importance had been attached to the limitation of the power itself. *That* (it might seem) was a resource against rulers whose interests were
5 habitually opposed to those of the people. What was now wanted was, that the rulers should be identified with the people; that their interest and will should be the interest and will of the nation. The nation did not need to be
10 protected against its own will. There was no fear of its tyrannising over itself. Let the rulers be effectually responsible to it, promptly removable by it, and it could afford to trust them with power of which it could itself dictate
15 the use to be made. Their power was but the nation's own power, concentrated, and in a form convenient for exercise. This mode of thought, or rather perhaps of feeling, was common among the last generation of European
20 liberalism, in the Continental section of which it still apparently predominates. Those who admit any limit to what a Government may do, except in the case of such Governments as they think ought not to exist, stand out as brilliant
25 exceptions among the political thinkers of the Continent. A similar tone of sentiment might

by this time have been prevalent in our own country if the circumstances which for a time encouraged it had continued unaltered.

But in political and philosophical theories, as well as in persons, success discloses faults 5 and infirmities which failure might have concealed from observation. The notion, that the people have no need to limit their power over themselves, might seem axiomatic, when popular government was a thing only dreamed about, 10 or read of as having existed at some distant period of the past. Neither was that notion necessarily disturbed by such temporary aberrations as those of the French Revolution, the worst of which were the work of an usurping 15 few, and which, in any case, belonged, not to the permanent working of popular institutions, but to a sudden and convulsive outbreak against monarchical and aristocratic despotism. In time, however, a democratic republic came to 20 occupy a large portion of the earth's surface, and made itself felt as one of the most powerful members of the community of nations ; and elective and responsible government became subject to the observations and criticisms which 25 wait upon a great existing fact. It was now

perceived that such phrases as "self-government" and "the power of the people over themselves" do not express the true state of the case. The "people" who exercise the
6 power are not always the same people with those over whom it is exercised; and the "self-government" spoken of is not the government of each by himself, but of each by all the rest. The will of the people,
10 moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority: the people, consequently, *may* desire to oppress
15 a part of their number, and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power. The limitation, therefore, of the power of government over individuals loses none of its importance when the holders of
20 power are regularly accountable to the community—that is, to the strongest party therein. This view of things, recommending itself equally to the intelligence of thinkers and to the inclination of those important classes in Eu-
25 ropean society to whose real or supposed interests democracy is adverse, has had no

difficulty in establishing itself; and in political speculations "the tyranny of the majority" is now generally included among the evils against which society requires to be on its guard.

Like other tyrannies, the tyranny of the majority was at first, and is still vulgarly, held in dread, chiefly as operating through the acts of the public authorities. But reflecting persons perceived that when society is itself the tyrant—society collectively, over the separate individuals who compose it—its means of tyrannising are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands of its political functionaries. Society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself. Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough; there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against

the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own. There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence: and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs as protection against political despotism.

But, though this proposition is not likely to be contested in general terms, the practical question, where to place the limit—how to make the fitting adjustment between individual independence and social control—is a subject on which nearly everything remains to be done. All that makes existence valuable to any one depends on the enforcement of restraints upon the actions of other people. Some rules of conduct, therefore, must be imposed, by law in the first place, and by opinion on many things which are not fit subjects for the operation of law. What these rules should be is the principal

question in human affairs; but if we except a few of the most obvious cases, it is one of those which least progress has been made in resolving. No two ages, and scarcely any two countries, have decided it alike; and the decision 5 of one age or country is a wonder to another. Yet the people of any given age and country no more suspect any difficulty in it than if it were a subject on which mankind had always been agreed. The rules which obtain among them- 10 selves appear to them self-evident and self-justifying. This all but universal illusion is one of the examples of the magical influence of custom, which is not only, as the proverb says, a second nature, but is continually mistaken for 15 the first. The effect of custom, in preventing any misgiving respecting the rules of conduct which mankind impose on one another, is all the more complete because the subject is one on which it is not generally considered neces- 20 sary that reasons should be given, either by one person to others, or by each to himself. People are accustomed to believe, and have been encouraged in the belief by some who aspire to the character of philosophers, that their feelings 25 on subjects of this nature are better than