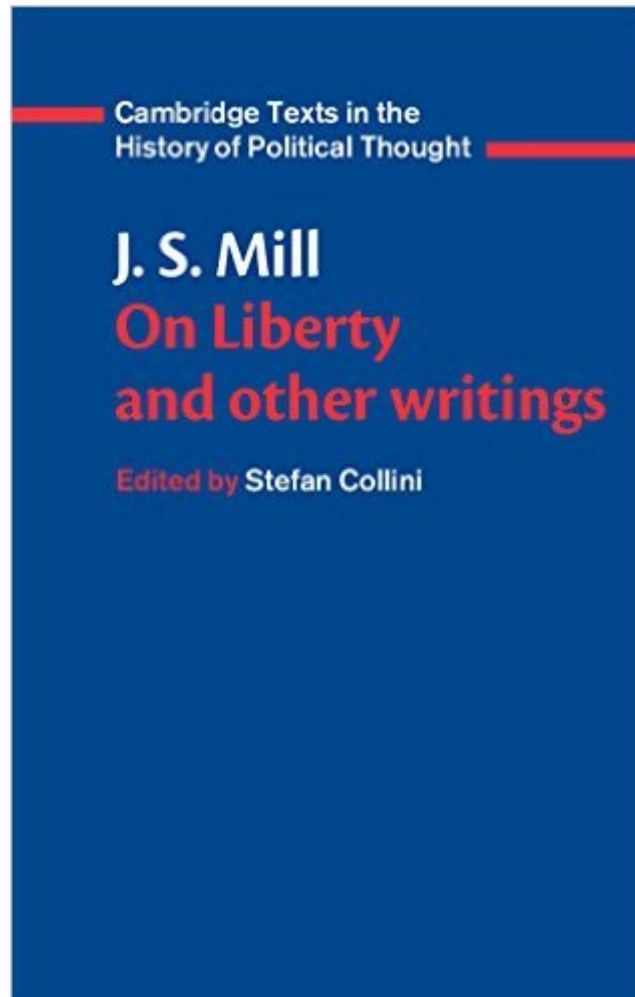


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J. S. Mill: 'On Liberty' And Other Writings (Cambridge Texts In The History Of Political Thought)



Synopsis

John Stuart Mill is one of the few indisputably classic authors in the history of political thought. On Liberty, first published in 1851, has become celebrated as the most powerful defense of the freedom of the individual and it is now widely regarded as the most important theoretical foundation for Liberalism as a political creed. Similarly, his The Subjection of Women, a powerful indictment of the political, social, and economic position of women, has become one of the cardinal documents of modern feminism. This edition brings together these two classic texts, plus Mill's posthumous Chapters on Socialism, his somewhat neglected examination of the strengths and weaknesses of various forms of Socialism. The Editor's substantial Introduction places these three works in the context both of Mill's life and of nineteenth-century intellectual and political history, and assesses their continuing relevance.

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1. Introduction John Stuart Mill opens his first chapter by establishing the sole basis of his moral system: "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being" (¶ 11). His philosophy thus holds that actions are right in proportion to their tendency to promote happiness, and wrong in proportion to their tendency to promote unhappiness. Happiness is equivalent to pleasure and the absence of pain; unhappiness is equivalent to pain and the privation of pleasure.

In this way, utilitarianism sets out a basic system to determine the morality of all actions, both private and public, individual and societal. On this basis, John Stuart Mill, in his essay *On Liberty*, sets out to define the proper limits of government and society on the freedom of the individual.² On Liberty. Liberty John Stuart Mill opens his essay by defining the subject he will explore: "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (¶ 1). This, he calls "Civil, or Social Liberty." The problem he will explore is the "struggle between Liberty and Authority," which is "the most conspicuous feature in the portions of history with which we are earliest familiar" (¶ 2). He explores the extent to which man's liberty may properly be checked by authority and he outlines the ways in which liberty is threatened by various tyrannies, such as the "tyranny of the political rulers" and the "tyranny of the majority" (social tyranny). For Mill, liberty permits man to act as he wishes when no harm falls upon other people.

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