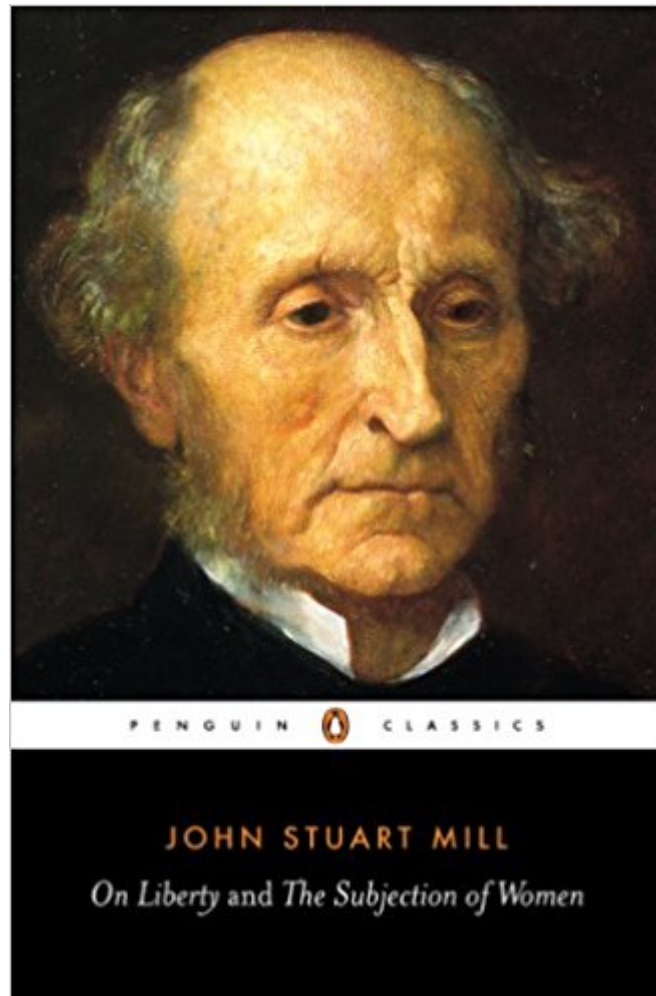




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# On Liberty And The Subjection Of Women (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Two cornerstones of liberalism from the great social radical of English philosophy John Stuart Mill was a prodigious thinker who sharply challenged the beliefs of his age. In *On Liberty*, one of the sacred texts of liberalism, he argues that any democracy risks becoming a "tyranny of opinion" in which minority views are suppressed if they do not conform to those of the majority. *The Subjection of Women*, written shortly after the death of Mill's wife, Harriet, stresses the importance of sexual equality. Together they provide eloquent testimony to the hopes and anxieties of Victorian England, and offer a trenchant consideration of what it really means to be free. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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## Customer Reviews

*On Liberty* remains a classic. . . . The present world would be better than it is if [Mill's] principles were more respected. (Bertrand Russell)

John Stuart Mill (1806-73) was educated by his father and through his influence obtained a clerkship

at India House. He formed the Utilitarian Society which met to read and discuss essays, and in 1825 he edited Bentham's Treatise upon Evidence. In 1826 he suffered an acute mental crisis and found that poetry helped him recover the will to live, particularly the work of Wordsworth. Having reconsidered his aims and those of the Benthamite school, he met Harriet Taylor and she inspired a great deal of his philosophy. They married in 1851. Utilitarianism was published in 1861 but before that Mill published his System of Logic (1843), Principles of Political Economy (1848) and On Liberty (1839). His other works include his classic Autobiography (1873). Mill retired in 1858 and became the independent MP for Westminster from 1865 to 1868. He spent the rest of his life in France and died in Avignon. Alan Ryan has served as a judge for the Film Fantasy Awards and is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. He regularly contributes to The Washington Post, USA Today, The Smithsonian, and Travel and Leisure, among other publications.

Excellent edition of this text.

good

This edition is well printed and bound for a black spine penguin classic. The text is, of course, a classic, a seminal work in individual liberalism.

Excellent read!

The feminist movement should go back and read JSM because this work is truly relevant. Everyone should read about equality as it was understood and intended.

Mill's ideas are delivered in clear language, and the steps between them are laid out rationally and logically, so that all his arguments are easy to follow. Unlike Rousseau, who treated political philosophy as something akin to a complex physics equation, Mill argues from reason and appeals to common sense. Furthermore, many of his arguments are fully applicable to political situations we see around us today. This book is WELL worth reading; in fact, were I given dictatorial powers, I would mandate that every person had to read this book before ever opening their mouth in a political discussion.

Very interesting read for anyone interested in political theory and philosophy. Can be somewhat

vague in his reasoning sometimes, as are most political theorists, but this is still nonetheless a classic and valuable read. A great edition of Mill.

This edition has a relatively unusual combination. "On Liberty" is more often paired with "Utilitarianism" and "Representative Government" but the pairing with "The Subjection of Women" is worthwhile even though the latter is primarily of historical interest now. "On Liberty" is one of the most important books on political thought of the nineteenth century. Fortunately for the 21st century reader it is also one of the most accessible. Mill was a libertarian who chose not to base his defence of liberty on natural rights but on his own revised version of utilitarianism: "I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions...grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being." This enables Mill to argue that freedom is needed if man is to be able to explore all the avenues of human development that allow the human race to progress. Total freedom is impossible so what determines the legitimate boundaries of freedom? Mill distinguishes between self-regarding and other-regarding actions. The former should never be interfered with and the latter subject to limitation only if they harm the legitimate rights of others. For Mill free thought is a self-regarding action which should not be curtailed, and free thought is virtually useless without free speech. Mill then proceeds to add a utilitarian argument in favour of free speech: if an opinion is silenced then mankind is necessarily the loser whether the opinion is true or false. He advances a number of arguments to support this, concluding with the claim that a climate of freedom is essential for "great thinkers" (his attachment to intellectual elitism) and "it is as much, and even more indispensable to enable average human beings to attain the mental stature they are capable of" (his revised utilitarianism). He has no truck with paternalists seeking to guide people's thoughts in the "right" direction. He was equally hostile to the idea that people had the right not to be offended; hence he opposed the blasphemy law. The single case Mill gives of an acceptable limitation of free speech is the case of corn-dealers and an excited mob. An opinion expressed in a newspaper that corn-dealers are "starvers of the poor" is legitimate, but the same view stated to an angry mob outside the corn-dealer's home may be limited if it "is a positive instigation to a mischievous act." Mill concedes that actions cannot be as free as speech and seeks to establish the proper limits of freedom of action. Mill proposes that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted...in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection." Because he rejects paternalism he opposes all interference with self-regarding actions. Mill would not have prevented people from taking drugs and he would have led the opposition to seat belt legislation. Mill spends a great deal of time attacking the "Social Rights" school that argued people had a right to be protected from

seeing evils such as prostitution and drunkenness around them. Mill disagrees, observing that drunkenness is unacceptable only if the person physically harms others or is, say, a soldier or policeman on duty. Mill even rejects state interference with liberty for the sake of crime prevention, e.g. poisons can be used for criminal purposes. Mill was willing to accept a register of their sale but not the banning of them. Mill believes we must not interfere with the "rights" of others but these are narrowly circumscribed, and Mill makes it clear that "rights" are not the same as "interests". Hence unrestricted laissez-faire is legitimate. As for moral decency arguments Mill does say that sexual intercourse in public is unacceptable, but would not have condemned sado-masochistic practices between consenting adults in private. For Mill it is important not to limit behaviour for any reason at all because any such action is likely to be the thin end of the wedge, leading to the justification for some further restriction. Though Mill is a very determined anti-paternalist he makes three exceptions: children, primitive societies and the disabled. Children must be guided until they reach maturity and they must be given compulsory education - something not given legislative force in England until 1871. As for primitive societies we must resist the notion that Mill was a typical Victorian believing in the "white man's burden" or inherent differences between races. He simply observed the reality of the world in the mid-nineteenth century but made it very clear any intervention in backward societies must be temporary with the aim to bring about self-government as soon as possible. Hence Mill was more libertarian than most modern writers on the subject. There is just one example where, at first sight, Mill may seem reactionary to modern readers. He wished to restrict the right to have children to those who could prove that they could support them. However, those who today wish others to be allowed to procreate at will do so on the grounds of human rights. Mill based his theories on utilitarianism, and not on rights. There was no welfare state when Mill wrote "On Liberty" and he was concerned with the well-being of children born to people without the means to support them. In view of the growing restrictions on freedom in many Western nations, "On Liberty" is well worth reading again. In particular I like Mill's argument that every restriction on freedom is the thin end of the wedge, providing a justification for further restrictions. Turning to "The Subjection of Women" we find arguments that women were in no way naturally unequal to men. Such views provoked mirth and hostility in equal measure in Victorian England but are, of course, now the norm. However, there is a link between "On Liberty" and "The Subjection of Women" (plus of course "Utilitarianism") and that is his frequent recourse to his revised version of utilitarianism. This book too is imbued with Mill's version of utilitarianism that wished to open up "all the avenues of human development that allow the human race to progress". Not only did Mill deny that women were in any way intrinsically inferior to men but declared that withholding the vote and restricting them to an inferior status legally and

socially held back their development. Not only did women themselves lose out as individuals but so too did society as a whole.

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