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*It was in February 1859, 150 years ago, that John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* was published. Mill's essay has been hugely influential upon subsequent thought, at least as influential as Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which was published in the November of that same year. Even so, we are in danger of neglecting its anniversary, if only thanks to the way media attention over recent weeks has tended to focus so exclusively upon Darwin.*

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**Why celebrate *On Liberty's* publication? One reason is plain and obvious: it remains the classic philosophical statement of a liberal position which continues to play a considerable role within political thought in the world at large, not just within academia. The main features of Mill's argument will always repay a rehearsal...**

First of all, Mill sets out to defend a 'very simple principle' according to which 'the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection', and that, 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others'.

But there is more to Mill's position than just that. For a start, his argument for the former principle goes hand-in-hand with a spirited defence of civil liberties. 'There is a sphere of action', he writes, 'in which society, as distinguished from the individual, has, if any, only an indirect interest', and he then goes on to list the liberties which fall within the sphere. These include, liberty of conscience, 'absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects', 'the liberty of tastes and pursuits' and the 'liberty of combination'. In *On Liberty's* second chapter Mill defends 'the liberty of thought and discussion', arguing that it constitutes humanity's best hope of reaching any form of truth or achieving of progress. It is an argument of which every contemporary discussion of free speech must take account.

In the third chapter, Mill celebrates 'the free development of individuality' which he sees as, 'one of the leading essentials of well-being'. In a passage almost poetic he writes that, 'Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing'. These are considerable ideals.

Of course, there are features of Mill's essay which mark him out as a child of his time. There is a characteristically Victorian optimism concerning the prospects for human progress – prospects over which we have become more pessimistic. There is also a high-mindedness of tone which would now be unfashionable. (Even at the time, Mill's style was compared – by Disraeli – with the remonstrations of a 'finishing governess'.) But we should not let such relatively superficial differences divert our attention away from the social and political issues by which Mill was exercised and which *On Liberty* was intended to address. What were they?

**First:** A pressure to conformity which Mill called 'the tyranny of the majority', 'a tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling', a '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'.

**Second:** Mill saw a need for constant vigilance against threats to the liberty of thought and discussion; threats which could issue from many a quarter. The greatest

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This briefing is being provided by the [British Humanist Association](#) to celebrate the 150th anniversary of *On Liberty*. John Stuart Mill himself, of course, was a non-Christian and a sceptical thinker and his book was badly received by some religious reviewers. There was a series of articles about it in *The English Churchman* in October and November 1859. Mill said of them, 'People are beginning to find out that the doctrines of the book are more opposed to their old opinions and feelings than they at first saw, and are taking the alarm accordingly and rallying for a fight...They claim for Christian morality all the things which I say are not in it, which is just what I wanted to provoke them to do.'

Today, however, the principles of liberty that he laid out can be values shared by religious people as well as by humanists – they are secular political principles that can bring people together in a cohesive community.

We are happy, therefore, to provide the enclosed briefing to MPs and peers in this important anniversary year. We are grateful for the authorship of this briefing to [Alan Haworth](#), fellow of the Global Policy Institute at London Metropolitan University; author of *Understanding the Political Philosophers: From Ancient to Modern Times* (Routledge 2004), and a member of the BHA's Humanist Philosophers' Group.

***"the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others"***

harm done by such threats is not to the boldly heretical, he wrote, but to those whose promising intellects are combined with timid characters and who, as a consequence, 'dare not follow out any bold, independent train of thought, lest it should land them in something which would admit of being considered irreligious or immoral'. How prescient those words now seem.

**Third:** Mill was alarmed by an all-pervasive and oppressive religiosity, reinforced by the tendency of dogmatic individuals to believe that, 'if they can once get their creed taught from authority, naturally think that no good, and some harm, comes of its being allowed to be questioned'. (The 'religious bigot' is a figure to whom Mill refers more than once in his essay.)

**Fourth:** Mill recognised that a modern society is irrevocably permeated by a diversity of attitudes and opinions, and to such an extent that only a political ethic founded upon the virtue of tolerance can accommodate it.

It was in response to such tendencies – tendencies which are just as recognisable in the UK of 2009 – that

Mill placed his trust in critical and scientific reason, the human ability to assess arguments and weigh evidence. Of course, he realised that even reason is imperfectly reliable – in fact, he is known for his insistence that no-one is infallible – but he also recognised it as the only resource we have.

***In the final chapter of On Liberty Mill remarks that it is, 'owing to the absence of any recognised general principles' that 'liberty is often granted where it should be withheld, as well as withheld where it should be granted'. That is the sentence which best captures the way we should now treat Mill's essay – as an object lesson in the systematisation of those general principles which most effectively embody the only values most appropriate to a free people; that is, as the articulation of a vision. If our liberty is now suffering the death of a thousand cuts – as many contend – it could well be through our failure to attempt just that.***

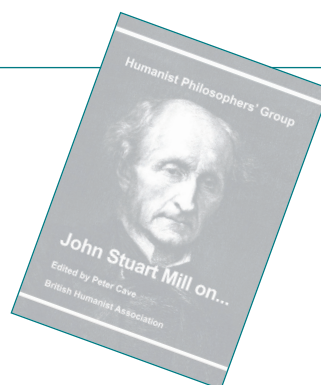


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***John Stuart Mill On...***

ed. Peter Cave (BHA 2006) ISBN 0901825263

...the Good Life by AC Grayling  
...Religion by Richard Norman  
...Liberty of Thought and Discussion by Brendan Larvor  
...Punishment by Michael Clark  
...Sexual Equality by Peter Cave  
...'Hate Speech' by A C Grayling



This collection of essays by leading philosophers was published in 2006 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of John Stuart Mill's birth and is available now at £4.50 plus postage to celebrate the 150th anniversary of *On Liberty*. Mill's Liberty Principle (often known as the "Harm Principle"), says roughly that, if actions are to be restricted, it must be that they are harmful, or likely to be harmful, to others. In our own day, with the awareness of terrorist dangers, public and private thinking has again been grappling with the tension between, on the one hand, the promotion of liberty, and, on the other hand, the need to prevent unnecessary harms.

*'Jealous and prejudiced restrictions on one another' - Mill both raised awareness of such restrictions and urged battle against them. Reading Mill today should remind us how important it is to refresh such awareness and to keep up the battle.* – Peter Cave

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