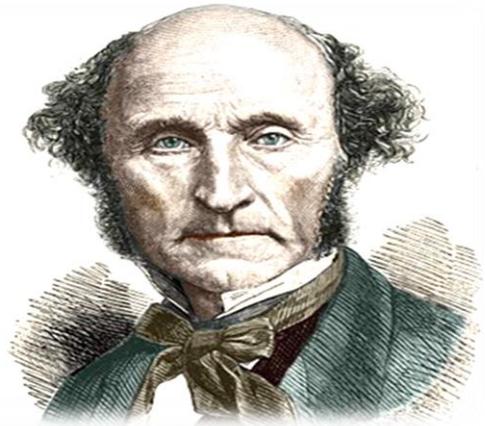


# JOHN STUART MILL

(1806-1873)



John Stuart Mill was the last of the utilitarian and foremost of the individualist thinking, who made a significant contribution in the fields of ethics, metaphysics, economics and politics. Mill was born in London in 1806. He was the son of James Mill, who was also a great philosopher and the writer of the famous book 'History of British India'. His father was teaching him Greek when he was only four years old, and Latin when he was eight. He neither went to a regular school nor to a University, but he read so much at his home. Basically, Mill's education was supervised by his father and his father's friend Jeremy Bentham. His father's desire to make him as an intellectual successor, shaped junior Mill's mind as best. So he grew up as an intelligent and disciplined student. By his extraordinary talent, he enriched the liberal tradition of political thought.

In 1826, he suffered a nervous breakdown at the age of 21. He fell into a long period of mental depression. The reason for this depression was given to his hectic and monotonous life imposed upon him by his father and Bentham. He pulled himself out of his depression by reading poetries of Wordsworth. After his recovery, later in life, he started looking at his father's and Bentham's philosophy of Utilitarianism critically.

As we all know that Mill grew up in the shadow of utilitarianism, and even after his mental depression, he managed to write a defence of utilitarianism. Therefore, he abandoned completely the Bentham's ideas and produced the utilitarian thinking in his own lines. He introduced his utilitarian views in his famous essay **“Utilitarianism” (1863)**. According to Jeremy Bentham, founder of Utilitarianism, the state should resort to minimum intervention in individual activities in order to secure the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’, which meant an emphasis on the expansion of the market economy and restriction of the sphere of state activity. Mill sought to revise this view of utilitarians so as to plead for the extension of state activity for the promotion of general welfare.

Bentham believed that pleasure differs only in quantity. But Mill rejected this idea and introduced the qualitative differences between kinds of pleasure. He argued that the man does not run after physical pleasure alone. He held that individual pleasure did not provide him maximum happiness. It is collective pleasure that gives him maximum happiness. So here Mill rejected the Bentham's doctrine of inner pleasure and given priority to collective pleasure. Mill went a step forward to give more importance to morality, liberty and dignity of man than pleasure. Mill placed qualitative pleasure as superior and long lasting for human life. He does not agree with quantitative or lower kind of pleasure on the contrary he has stressed on qualitative or higher kind of pleasure. He has stated in his ‘Utilitarianism’ (1863) *‘It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied’*. He also did not agree with Bentham

that 'Push pin was as good as poetry'. He asserted that pleasures differ in quality and we should prefer a smaller amount of qualitative pleasure than a sufficient quantity of lower pleasure.

## **THE WRITINGS OF J. S. MILL**

- Elements of Political Economy. (1820)
- System of Logic. (1843)
- On Liberty. (1859)
- The Subjection of Women. (1869)
- The Consideration on Representative Government. (1861)
- Utilitarianism. (1863)
- August Comte and Positivism. (1865)

## **MILL ON LIBERTY**

Mill was a champion of individual liberty. He asked when it is right for the society to interfere with the liberty of an individual? In his essay **“On Liberty” (1859)**, he discussed his concept of liberty. He was concerned with individual development. According to him, there can be no self-development without liberty. He always wanted all round development of all men and women. Individual development means an increase in one's rational capacity to think and this is possible when one is allowed freedom. According to Mill liberty means the desire of somebody to perform works independently. He identified three major areas in which the liberty of individuals must be protected: (a) Freedom of thought and expression, (b) Freedom of action and (c) Freedom of association. He considered freedom of

expression to be the most important liberty. As regards the freedom of action and freedom of association, he conceded certain restrictions on these freedoms so that no one is allowed to harm any other person. He has developed an idea of **Harm principle** which tells us that an expression of the idea that the right to self-determination is not unlimited. It means we can never interfere with an individual's will except to prevent harm to others. He argued that *'The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.'* Mill divided the action of the individuals in two categories namely Self-regarding action and Other-regarding action. The actions which surrounds only the individual alone and does not affect to the interest of any other individuals is called self-regarding action, and the activities which affect directly or indirectly the society or other individuals is called other regarding actions. He concluded that, there should be no interference with self-regarding action, but only with such other-regarding actions as produce positive demonstrable harm to others. But the state could also interfere in the self-regarding action if it was thought to be particularly injurious to individual himself.

All of we know that Mill was a great supporter of individual freedom. So he was stick by saying this in his point *'If all mankind minus one were of one opinion and any one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing man'*. So it is clear that for Mill it is an evil to suppress the will of an individual. He said that minority opinion must never be suppressed even

when it is wrong or right. If the opinion is right then society will correct itself and if the opinion is wrong than society will stand vindicated.

Though Mill is one of the extra-ordinary thinkers contributing significant thought to the individual liberty, but his thought has not shot the mouth of critics. Ernest Barker called him as the prophet of empty liberty. The following pitfalls are charged against him.

In the first place, it is difficult to identify rightly ‘self-regarding actions’ and ‘other-regarding actions’ of an individual. It is alleged that by allowing the state to interfere in the so-called ‘other-regarding actions’. He has given sweeping powers to the state.

In the second place, sometimes his idea on liberty collide with each other. Sometimes he gives immense freedom to individuals and in some other time he has entrusted enough power in the hands of the state. So it creates confusion among the readers.

Lastly, he has not identified any legal framework to prohibit the misuse of liberty. Because, sometimes the ill intension of wicked people would be a great obstacle for the progress of the nation. So there must be some remedies against misuse of freedom.

## **MILL ON DEMOCRACY**

Mill’s “**Considerations on Representative Government**” (1861) picturises his idea on democracy. As a true democrat, he wanted to maintain individual liberty in

all spheres of human endeavour. He argued that democracy and liberty, taken together, create the possibility of human excellence. For the development of a free and reasonable mind; freedom of thought, expression and action are necessary. He supported the representative government, because in this system people can exercise their moral and intellectual capacities by participating in politics. He believed only in representative democracy, because for him it is the most suitable system for the overall development of an individual and also a nation. It also makes the government accountable to citizenry and creates a fair environment in a nation.

It may be noted that Mill advocated democracy only for those where people are educated, rational, noble and virtuous that's mean he favoured it only for developed nations, not for colonial and backward nations. He argued that it will be improper to introduce democracy in backward and immature societies. He supported the concept of plural voting, where all adults have a vote but the intelligent and more talented persons have more votes than the less capable. Besides, he favoured public open voting system.



Mill was not only known as a champion of liberty, but also an early advocate of equal rights for women. He was deeply influenced by Harriet Taylor. Taylor was a British philosopher and women's rights advocate. In his essay, '**The Subjection of Women**' (1869) describes his views on the inequality between men and women. In this work he gives his opinion on why men have so much power over women and

why this occurs. In his ‘**Autobiography**’ (1873) he has admitted that this essay was written by him in close collaboration with his wife Harriet Taylor Mill. He supported women’s right to vote, equal property rights to women, right to get an easy divorce etc. He said also that women are equal to men in all their abilities, so there is no justification for discrimination.

The above study of Mill stands him in a highest position. As a savior of individual life and protector of state action, his contributions would be remembered in the history of human life.

*Thank You*

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