

JS Mill

Bentham and Classical Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham—the father of utilitarianism!"

Bentham wasn't writing for kings or philosophers in ivory towers. No! He called it a "**philosophy of the common man**"—something that could guide everyone from a cobbler to a clerk. And what did he believe? At the heart of all human action, according to Bentham, are two forces: **pleasure and pain**. That's it. That simple.

As Bentham famously put it, "**Nature has placed man under two sovereign masters: pain and pleasure.**"

Every decision we make, he argued, is guided by these two masters. Whether you eat a sweet, study late, or scroll on your phone—it's either to gain pleasure or avoid pain.

And here's the twist: **all humans are equal in this calculation**. Bentham said there's **no superior or inferior soul**. Whether you're a poet or a pin-player (yes, literally playing pushpin, a simple game), what matters is how much **happiness** it brings. That's why he boldly claimed:

"Pushpin is as good as poetry"—as long as it produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

This is the **core of classical utilitarianism**—and it's **quantitative**. Bentham wasn't just interested in whether something is right or wrong. He wanted a system, a **felicific calculus**, that could **measure** happiness. Imagine trying to calculate how much happiness one action brings compared to another—that's what Bentham was aiming for!

But here's something important: this wasn't about collective harmony in some abstract way. Bentham treated **man as an individualist**—each person's happiness counts. So when we talk about the **aggregate happiness**, we mean the **total sum** of individual pleasures and pains. It's like stacking everyone's joys and subtracting everyone's sufferings to see what action wins.

So, what did this mean for society?

Bentham believed in a **minimal state**—a government that doesn't interfere unless necessary. Why? Because individuals know their own pleasures and pains best. He also believed that **economic growth** (think GDP!) was the **only effective way to tackle poverty**. If we want to increase happiness, we need to raise living standards, not just hand out charity. A growing economy brings more pleasure, more opportunity, and less suffering.

Mill's Revision of Utilitarianism

Jeremy Bentham gave us a bold, revolutionary idea—**quantitative utilitarianism**, based purely on **pleasure and pain**. But it didn't take long before critics jumped on it, mocking it as a "**pig's philosophy**". Why? Because they said it reduced ethics to animalistic, base pleasures—as if the highest goal in life was just food, sex, and games.

Enter: **John Stuart Mill**—the man who said, "**No! Ethics is more than just the stomach.**"

He was deeply influenced by Plato and Socrates. And it shows. Mill brought **idealism** into utilitarianism—he added **depth, soul, and dignity** to Bentham's logic. He famously declared:

"It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied."

And he didn't stop there. He extended that:

"Better to be a man dissatisfied than a pig satisfied."

Why did he say this? Because **Mill believed in the human capacity for reason**. Animals, he said, are driven only by **appetite**—they want immediate pleasure. But **man has reason**—we can reflect, understand others, make sacrifices, and find meaning.

So Mill made a critical distinction between:

- **Pleasure** – Immediate satisfaction, often sensory or base.
- **Happiness** – A richer, deeper fulfillment, which includes things like **understanding others, finding meaning in sacrifice, and satisfying the soul**.

This was **Mill's big revision**: He said that **quality** matters, not just quantity. Bentham's felicific calculus was about "how much" pleasure—but Mill asked, "**what kind**" of pleasure? A life of poetry, learning, and moral sacrifice is of **higher quality** than a life of base enjoyment, even if the latter gives more frequent bursts of joy.

Now, what about society?

- **Bentham**: Focused on **state action**, and preferred **non-interference**—a **minimal state** that maximizes utility.
- **Mill**: Saw **man as a social and ethical being by nature**. Therefore, **utility should guide not just the state**, but the **individual's moral growth** too.

He encouraged people to **perform sacrificial acts**, even if it means temporary dissatisfaction, because these lead to **higher happiness**—the kind that nourishes the soul.

Mill, therefore, becomes a **transitional figure** in the history of liberal thought. Some scholars even called him a:

"Peter who denied his master."

Why? Because while he admired Bentham, he **revised** his master's ideas fundamentally—**from pleasure to purpose, from quantity to quality**.

He stood at the **crossroads between classical liberalism and modern liberalism**:

- **Classical** (like Bentham): Emphasized freedom from interference.
- **Modern** (like Mill): Emphasized moral development, education, and ethical responsibility.

Liberty: The Core of Liberalism

If you really want to understand **liberalism**, you can't just talk about the economy or rights or laws. You have to go deeper—to its very **core**, its beating heart—and that, my friends, is **LIBERTY**.

In his **famous work *On Liberty***, **John Stuart Mill** didn't just touch on liberty—he examined it **systematically** and **deeply**, brick by brick, thought by thought. And what he did was revolutionary.

He said: **Liberty isn't just a side value—it is the CORE value of liberalism**. Yes, even **more central than utility** itself.

Now pause and think: this is coming from the man who revised utilitarianism! So for him to say liberty is *even more important*—that tells us just how sacred it was to him.

Why?

Because for the individual, liberty is the condition for happiness.

It's not optional. It's not decorative. It's **essential**.

Without liberty, how can you:

- Develop your **personality**?
- Discover your **potential**?
- Make mistakes, learn, grow, and live with dignity?

Mill believed that each human being is unique—and that **liberty is the soil in which that uniqueness can bloom**. To be free is not just to escape chains—it's to become your truest self.

And for the **state**?

Here's the brilliant part. Mill warned:

“No government can become great by dwarfing its own people.”

Boom.

Read that again.

If a government suppresses thought, punishes dissent, or controls every choice—**it isn't leading—it's shrinking**. Because in Mill's eyes, the **state is the individual writ large**.

What does that mean?

It means that a strong state isn't one that dominates its citizens—it's one that is **made strong by strong individuals**. A society is only as vibrant, as creative, and as great as the **freedom of its people**.

So, liberty for Mill is both:

- **A moral necessity** for the individual
- **A political necessity** for the state

And here's the magic: He tied liberty and happiness together. He didn't see them in conflict. He believed that **only when people are free can they truly be happy**.

The Essence:

- **Liberty** is not a luxury—it is the **foundation**.
- It is **more central than utility**—because without freedom, even pleasure is hollow.
- It fuels the **development of personality**, the **realization of potential**, and the **greatness of nations**.
- A **state that dwarfs its people**, dwarfs itself.
- And a society that protects liberty, **protects the soul of liberalism**.

Reasonable Restriction: Harm Principle

The deeper question: How far should liberty go?"

And that's exactly what **J.S. Mill** tried to answer with his **Harm Principle**—a powerful idea meant to **balance liberty with responsibility**.

Mill's Harm Principle says this:

The only justification for limiting someone's liberty is to prevent harm to others.

This simple-sounding principle holds the key to **reasonable restriction** in a free society. But it rests on a subtle distinction—so pay attention!

Mill separates actions into two categories:

1. **Self-regarding actions:** These affect *only yourself*. Mill said: **No role of the state here**. Let people live, even if they make mistakes. Freedom includes the right to be foolish.
2. **Other-regarding actions:** These affect *others*, and here, Mill allows **state intervention**—but only to **prevent harm**, not to enforce morality or social norms.

So, if someone drinks too much in their own home—**that's their business**. But if they drive drunk and risk others' lives—**that's society's business**.

Mill added a humane twist too. If a person is **ignorant**, the state **may intervene to inform**, to **make him aware**—but **not to coerce**.

For example: A man wants to cross a dangerous bridge. The state can put up a warning sign, or even stop him briefly to check if he understands the risk. But once he says, "Yes, I know"—he must be **free to choose**. That's liberty.

But here's where it gets deep—and controversial.

Sir Ernest Barker, a political thinker and critic, wasn't convinced. He critiqued Mill as:

A prophet of empty liberty and a scholar of abstract individualism.

What did he mean?

Barker believed that Mill's vision of man was too **atomistic**—as if individuals were floating islands, disconnected from society. But real humans, he said, are shaped by relationships, community, culture. He challenged the idea that some actions are ever truly "self-regarding."

Let's go back to the bridge example.

Barker argued: **Even self-regarding actions can be problematic**. What if the man **doesn't know** the bridge is dangerous? Is he really acting freely? Or is he unknowingly headed to harm?

This is where **Barker introduces the metaphysical idea of the "real will."**

He says: Real freedom isn't just doing what you *want*, it's doing what you *would want if you were fully informed, fully rational*—if your **real will** was active.

In that light, **freedom without wisdom is not freedom at all**. And that's why Barker saw Mill not as a pure liberal, but as a **positive liberal**—someone who believes the state should help people achieve their higher selves.

So who is right? That's for you to explore.

But despite the critiques, one thing remains widely accepted:

“If anyone is liberal, it is Mill.”

Why? Because he gave us the most elegant framework to **defend liberty while acknowledging responsibility**. He trusted the individual, but drew the line at **harm to others**—a principle that still echoes in today's debates on free speech, personal choices, and state power.

The Essence:

- **Harm Principle** = Freedom *up to the point* of harming others.
- **Self-regarding actions** = State should **stay out**.
- **Other-regarding actions** = May **invite intervention**.
- State can **inform**, not **coerce**.
- **Barker's critique**: Real humans are not **atomistic**; even “self-regarding” acts can have **real consequences**.
- The idea of “**real will**” challenges passive liberty and points to **positive liberalism**.
- Still, Mill remains the **torchbearer of liberalism**—because he trusted in reason, autonomy, and the moral power of freedom.

Freedom of Speech and Expression

If there's one thing that keeps a democracy alive and honest—it's freedom of speech.”

And **no one** argued for it more powerfully than **John Stuart Mill**.

In his stirring work *On Liberty*, Mill defended not just **freedom of speech**, but also **freedom of action**, **freedom of association**, and **freedom of expression**—and he made it clear: **These are not luxuries. They are vital to democracy.**

Why? Because without them, **democracy itself becomes dangerous**.

Mill warned us about the greatest threat to free society—not a dictator, but the crowd.

He called it the **tyranny of the majority**.

That's when the majority—just because it is larger or louder—**silences the voices of the few**, especially the different, the unconventional, the critical. And to Mill, **this was just as dangerous** as a king's tyranny.

But why was Mill so passionate about this?

Because to him, **freedom of opinion** wasn't just important—it was the **most precious** of all freedoms.

Let's break it down:

1. Only humans possess opinion

Mill said: Animals may have instincts, but **only humans can hold and share opinions**. That makes freedom of opinion a **sacred human capacity**.

2. It serves utility

Mill—ever the utilitarian—argued that freedom of speech serves a clear **social purpose**. How? It enables **dialectics**—the open exchange of ideas. And only through this back-and-forth can we:

- Discover **truth**
- **Correct errors**
- And **grow**—as individuals and as a society

And here comes one of his most **beautiful insights**:

Even a **mad person** or a **completely wrong person** can still help society—**simply by making others think**. Even their **silence** can provoke reflection. So **no one** should be silenced—not because they’re always right, but because **they help others sharpen their thinking**.

“We lose something when we shut down a voice—even if we think it’s nonsense.”

That’s how fiercely Mill protected **minority opinions**.

For Mill, liberty must guard against **both**:

- **Tyranny of one over all** (a king, a dictator)
- **Tyranny of all over one** (the mob, the majority)

Neither is acceptable. Because in both cases, the **individual mind is crushed**—and without individual freedom, democracy dies a slow death.

The Essence:

- Mill defended **freedom of speech, expression, action, and association** as essential to a **healthy democracy**.
- Without them, society risks falling into the **tyranny of the majority**.
- **Freedom of opinion** is the **most precious**, because:
 - It’s uniquely **human**
 - It promotes **utility** through **dialectics**
 - Even the **wrong or mad voice** has value
- Mill believed **no one has the right to suppress another’s opinion**, no matter how small their number.
- He stood firmly against **both absolute rule and mob rule**—because liberty must protect the **individual thinker** above all.

And that is why **Mill is not just a defender of liberty—he is its philosopher, its guardian, and its voice of reason**.

On Democracy: A Reluctant Democrat

when we think of democracy today, we often imagine it as the perfect system. But John Stuart Mill? He wasn't so sure."

Yes, Mill defended liberty, and yes, he supported democracy—but he did so with reluctance and deep concern. That's why he's often called a **reluctant democrat**.

In his work *On Representative Democracy*, Mill made it clear:

Democracy is the best form of government—to enjoy liberty.

But—and it's a big *but*—Mill didn't treat democracy as a **free gift**. He said it **must be earned**, and it only works **if the people are ready for it**.

What kind of democracy did Mill prefer?

His **ideal** was **direct democracy**—a system where people govern themselves directly. But he understood that **modern societies are large and complex**, so he accepted **representative democracy** as the **second-best** option. Still good, but not perfect.

But here's where it gets controversial.

Mill believed that democracy **requires a democratic society**—a society with:

- **Educated citizens**
- A commitment to **democratic values**
- **Moral responsibility** and **public spirit**

Without these, democracy becomes dangerous. That's why he said:

Democracy is not for barbarians.

In fact, Mill went so far as to **endorse benevolent despotism for colonies**—yes, **benevolent despotism**. He believed that societies not yet ready for democratic self-rule needed **wise rulers** to guide them.

This was in sharp contrast to **Bentham**, who had **supported self-government for colonies**, believing liberty was universal.

Like **Alexis de Tocqueville**, Mill **feared the future of democracy**. He worried about:

- The **tyranny of the majority**—where popular opinion silences dissent
- **Dull conformity**—where everyone thinks alike, not because they're free, but because they're pressured to follow the crowd
- And the **mediocrity** that can arise from **universal voting**, without education or responsibility

So Mill proposed **bold reforms** to **improve democracy**, not just accept it blindly.

Here are some of his key proposals:

1. **Weighted voting based on property**
 - More property = more stake in society = more votes
 - Yes, it sounds elitist, but Mill saw it as a way to ensure **responsibility** in voters
2. **Plural voting**
 - If you own property in multiple areas, you can vote **in each of them**
 - His logic: every property owner contributes to multiple communities

3. **Proportional representation**
– To make sure **minorities and diverse voices** are represented in Parliament
4. **Open ballots**
– No secret voting. He believed **voting is a public duty**, not a private preference
5. **Continued importance of the House of Lords**
– Mill wanted **checks and balances**—he saw the Lords as a counterweight to populist pressure
6. **Voting rights for women**
– Yes, Mill was ahead of his time here. He **boldly argued for women's suffrage**, saying democracy was incomplete without it

So what do we make of Mill?

He was a thinker **torn between idealism and realism**:

- He believed in the **promise of democracy**, but feared its **dangers**.
- He wanted liberty, but with **order, wisdom, and responsibility**.
- He embraced reforms, but **feared revolution**.

The Essence:

- Mill called democracy the **best path to liberty**, but only when paired with **education, ethics, and readiness**.
- He supported **representative democracy**—but only as a practical second-best to the ideal.
- He feared the **tyranny of the majority** and **unthinking uniformity**.
- He endorsed **reforms** like **weighted voting, plural votes, and proportional representation**, while also standing up for **women's rights**.
- And though **Bentham trusted the people**, Mill trusted in their **potential**—but not their readiness.

And that is **John Stuart Mill**—a **reluctant democrat**, a **reforming liberal**, and a man who asked the tough question:

"Can liberty survive without wisdom?"

He didn't give easy answers—but he gave us the tools to keep democracy honest, intelligent, and free.

Mill on Women

John Stuart Mill's boldest and most progressive stands—his fight for women's rights.

While many 19th-century thinkers were debating liberty and democracy, **Mill looked society in the eye** and asked a painful question:

"How can you speak of freedom, while half the population is still enslaved?"

In his powerful work, **The Subjugation of Women**, Mill didn't mince his words. He made a clear, unapologetic declaration:

“All forms of slavery have ended, except one—the slavery of women.”

Imagine the courage it took to say that in Victorian England! At a time when women had **no vote, no legal identity, no public voice**, Mill stood up and called it what it was—**slavery**.

He saw the **subjugation of women** not as a natural state, but as a **social construct**—a tradition passed down so widely and for so long that it had started to **appear natural**.

But Mill warned:

It is neither natural nor desirable.

Mill was not just advocating for voting rights—he argued for **women’s full participation in the public sphere**. That means:

- In **politics**
- In **education**
- In the **workplace**
- And in **decision-making at every level**

He believed that a truly free and flourishing society **must include the voices of women**—in lawmaking, in leadership, in shaping the future.

But Mill went even further.

He pointed out that **women’s inclusion would actually benefit society as a whole**.

- It would **reduce social negativities** like domestic violence, moral decay, and narrow-mindedness.
- Once women stepped **out of the four walls**, men would no longer be the unquestioned rulers of the home.
- Instead, they would be **forced to behave more civilised**, respectful, and responsible.
- And perhaps most powerfully—**men would feel more inspired to work hard**, to grow, to improve themselves—not just to dominate, but to **earn respect**.

So, what was Mill really saying?

That **equality is not just a women’s issue—it’s a human issue**. A society that keeps women down also **shrinks the soul of men**, limits progress, and traps everyone in outdated roles.

Mill envisioned a world where men and women walk **side by side**, not in competition, but in **cooperation**—as equals in dignity, freedom, and opportunity.

The Essence:

- In **The Subjugation of Women**, Mill argued passionately for **women’s right to vote and participate in public life**.

- He declared that **women's oppression is the last remaining form of slavery**.
- Their subjugation appears **natural only because it is universal**, but it is **neither natural nor right**.
- Including women would **reduce social ills**, make men **more civilised**, and **inspire them to work harder**.
- Mill believed that a society can't call itself free or just unless **women are truly equal**.

And that is why **John Stuart Mill** was not just a philosopher of liberty, but a true **champion of justice for all**—bold enough to challenge his time, and **wise enough to know** that **no society rises when half of it is held down**.

Modern Relevance

John Stuart Mill may have lived in the 1800s, but his ideas are alive all around you!"

1. Freedom of Speech

Mill warned against **tyranny of the majority**—exactly what we see today in **cancel culture** and online mobs.

Example: When comedians, authors, or activists get de-platformed for controversial views, Mill reminds us: **"Even wrong opinions have value—they help us think better."**

2. Responsible Democracy

Mill feared **unthinking votes and mob rule**.

Example: The spread of misinformation in elections (like the U.S. 2020 election or India's WhatsApp-driven rumors) shows why Mill stressed **educated and ethical voters**.

3. Women's Rights

Mill was one of the first to demand **voting rights for women**.

Example: Today's fights for **equal pay, reproductive rights, and leadership roles** echo Mill's words: **"All slavery has ended—except the slavery of women."**

4. Liberty with Responsibility

Mill believed liberty is sacred—but only until it **harms others** (Harm Principle).

Example: During COVID-19, refusing to wear masks or vaccines in public wasn't "freedom"—it was **harmful**. Mill would say: liberty ends where **harm begins**.

5. Ethical Governance

Mill's utilitarianism focused on **quality** of happiness, not just quantity.

Example: In policymaking—whether it's **climate change** or **healthcare**—leaders today ask: “What brings the **greatest good** to the most people, without degrading dignity?”

So why is Mill still relevant?

Because he teaches us to be:

- Free, **but not reckless**
- Democratic, **but thoughtful**
- Equal, **but not blind to history**

In every modern fight—for rights, justice, and truth—Mill still whispers: “Think deeply. Live freely. Choose wisely.”

Previous Year Questions

1. “The legal subordination of one sex to another is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human development.” (J. S. Mill). Comment. 2023, 15.
2. J. S. Mill's ideas on women's suffrage. 2021, 10.
3. 'Representative democracy... means the people as a body must be able to control the general direction of government policy.' (J.S. Mill). Comment. 2020, 15.
4. Comment on: “The worth of a State... Is the worth of individuals composing it.” (J. S. Mill). 2011, 20
5. Comment on: "All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility." (J. S. Mill). 2014, 10
6. Comment on: John Stuart Mill is a 'reluctant democrat'. - C.L. Wayper. 2018, 10
7. Comment on: 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 (J S Mill). 2005, 20