

# John Stuart Mill: Reading and Discussion Guide

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Although it was written after the Constitution, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) is considered to be one of the greatest defenses of free speech and individuality ever written, and some of its central premises have been embraced by the Supreme Court in its rulings on the First Amendment. Among other things, *On Liberty* expressed Mill's worry that prevailing opinion in society can have the unhealthy effect of silencing dissenting voices, and advocated for humility in assessing our own systems of belief and in considering points of view different from our own.

## KEY QUOTES FOR CLOSE READING AND DISCUSSION:

"In this age, the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage which it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time."

"He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion... Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them...he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form."

"The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it."

"If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind."

"The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."

"Every man who says frankly and fully what he thinks is so far doing a public service. We should be

grateful to him for attacking most unsparingly our most cherished opinions.”

“Even despotism does not produce its worst effects, so long as individuality exists under it; and whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called, and whether it professes to be enforcing the will of God or the injunctions of men.”

“A state which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes--will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished.”

“Truth gains more even by the errors of one who, with due study and preparation, thinks for himself, than by the true opinions of those who only hold them because they do not suffer themselves to think...”

“Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow.”

“No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize that as a thinker it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead.”

“Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post as soon as there is no enemy in the field.”

“The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority; type people, consequently, may desire to oppress a part of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power.”

“There is no parity between the feeling of a person for his own opinion, and the feeling of another who is offended at his holding it.”

“We must beware of admitting a principle of which we should resent as a gross injustice the application to ourselves.”

### QUESTIONS:

1. In the first quotation, why does Mill consider non-conformity a “service?” Explain the following quotation: “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.” Why is this so?
2. Do you agree with the following statement: “If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind”? Why or why not?
3. Consider the following very important quotation by John Stuart Mill: “The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is

right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.” Explain what this quote means to you and give an example illustrating it.

4. Consider the following statement: “Every man who says frankly and fully what he thinks is so far doing a public service. We should be grateful to him for attacking most unsparingly our most cherished opinions.” Why does Milton think we should be grateful when someone “attacks” our opinions?
5. Consider this statement: “Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always likely to be, a small minority; but in order to have them, it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow.” What is the soil in which persons of genius grow?
6. Consider this quotation: “Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post as soon as there is no enemy in the field.” Who or what is the “enemy” to which Mill refers in this statement?
7. Consider this statement: “No one can be a great thinker who does not recognize that as a thinker it is his first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead.” Can you think of any forces that might interfere with the “duty to follow his intellect” wherever it may lead?
8. In this statement, Mill refers to the problem of holding minority or unpopular opinions: “The will of the people, moreover, practically means the will of the most numerous or the most active part of the people; the majority, or those who succeed in making themselves accepted as the majority; type people, consequently, may desire to oppress a part of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power.” Should people with minority or unpopular opinions be silent or be silenced? What would happen if they were?
9. What does John Stuart Mill mean by the following statement: “There is no parity between the feeling of a person for his own opinion, and the feeling of another who is offended at his holding it?”