

John Stuart Mill (1806–73)

Liberty

JS Mill is a great champion of the individual liberty. He has developed his concept of liberty in his important work *Essays on Liberty*. Mill thought that the society and the legislatures were organs which tried to impose their opinion on the individuals and hence required checking. It was under these circumstances that Mill came out as champion of individual liberty to save man from the tyranny of both the legislature and the so-called public opinion. *According to JS Mill, "Liberty consists in doing what one desires and doesn't desire to fall into the river."*

He is in favour of individual liberty in two senses:

1. **Negative sense:** Here the society has no right to interfere in the matters of the individual. It means that he promotes laissez-faire state and individualism. In this way, the state should not have right to interfere in the individual affairs.
2. **Positive sense:** In its positive sense, it stands for the grants of the largest and the greatest amount of freedom for all round development of the individual.

On the basis of these two senses, he supports the negative liberty.

Negative Liberty: It consists of inward dominance of conscience, liberty of thought and expression, absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment of all subjects, scientific, moral, theology, practical or speculative, etc.

Liberty of Thought and Expression: While highlighting the importance of liberty of thought and expression, Mill argues that the state has no right to suppress the independent thinking of an individual because the truth develops after a detailed discussion.

He is of the opinion that freedom of thought and expression proves helpful in creativity also. Such creativity can be effective only if it allows to function properly and freely. It helps in the development of a civilized and moral person. He is against outdated customs and practices which are not based on the reason as such conventions and customs are the greatest obstacles in the way of freedom of thought and expression.

He believes in individuality. For him, it is the capacity for critical enquiry and responsible thought, self-development and expression of free-will. He supports absolute

liberty of conscience, belief and expression for human development. Democracy, public opinion and collectivism were dangers to individual liberty and must be kept within their sphere of activity.

Mill also stands for the liberty of the representatives of the people in the elected bodies. They should have the independence of views and expression.

He also highlighted the role of education for developing intellectual and critical enquiry in finding the truth. He considers liberty as belonging to higher and advanced civilizations, and it should not be enjoyed by the illiterate masses.

Thus, JS Mill supports negative liberty with absence of restraints. His liberty is applicable to mature individuals. He excludes children, invalids, mentally handicapped and barbarian societies.

Mill divides all human actions into two categories:

- i. Self-Regarding Actions: Those actions in which the individual is allowed to do whatever he wants to do. He enjoys absolute freedom.
- ii. Other-Regarding Actions: If individual actions affect other members of the society, these are known as other-regarding actions. State puts certain restrictions on the actions of the individual.

Criticism

- Individual freedom promotes inequality among individuals.
- Barker criticized Mill as “the Prophet of empty Liberty and an abstract individual.”
- Only literate, mature and individuals belonging to higher and advanced civilization can enjoy the liberty is against the basic human rights.

Points to Remember

- Liberal, pluralist, elitist and feminist philosopher
- Adult franchise mainly voting for educated and propertied class.
- Staunch prophet of individual liberty

- He was Prophet of empty liberty said by Barker
- Representative government is the best form of government
- Rejected natural distinction between men and women
- Participation maximized responsibility
- State is product of will rather than interest
- Favoured public voting and bicameral legislature
- According to Mill, 'it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied'
- Main works: System of Logic 1843, Political Economy 1848, Essays on Liberty 1859, Parliamentary Reforms 1859, Representative Government 1861, Utilitarianism 1863, Subjection of Women 1869, The Autobiography 1874.