

# POLITICAL & SOCIAL THOUGHT

## The Nature & Purpose of Liberty

### Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What premises, assumptions, reasons, evidence, and other important considerations lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, it is *information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support and justify accepting the author's conclusions as opposed to other ones.

### Reading

Mill, J. S. (2003). *On Liberty*. In M. Warnock (Ed.), *Utilitarianism and On Liberty: Including Mill's 'Essay on Bentham' and Selections from the Writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 88–180). Oxford: Blackwell. (Original work published 1859.)

(Excerpts are from Chapter 1.)

### Questions

1. In the opening of chapter 1 (in paragraph 1), what issue does John Stuart Mill say he seeks to address in this essay?
2. Mill compares the need for liberty in societies governed by monarchies (in paragraph 2) with the need for liberty in democratic societies (in paragraphs 3–8).  
In each case, why is liberty needed? In other words, what is liberty supposed to protect an individual against?
3. Mill says “the object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle” (paragraph 9, p. 94). Today, this principle is now known as the **harm principle**.  
What is this principle? What does the harm principle protect against? To whom does this principle apply (see especially paragraph 10)?
4. According to Mill (in paragraphs 9–11), how is he going to justify the harm principle?
5. Finally, to what three categories of liberties/rights does Mill claim (in paragraphs 12–16) the harm principle protects? What do you think these three categories have in common in order for Mill to suggest that they are the appropriate ones for liberty?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses (unless you miss or are late to class, and must then submit a written reading question review).

You do need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting. You may, during the following class, be randomly selected to present answers to these if selected to do so for a verbal reading question review.