

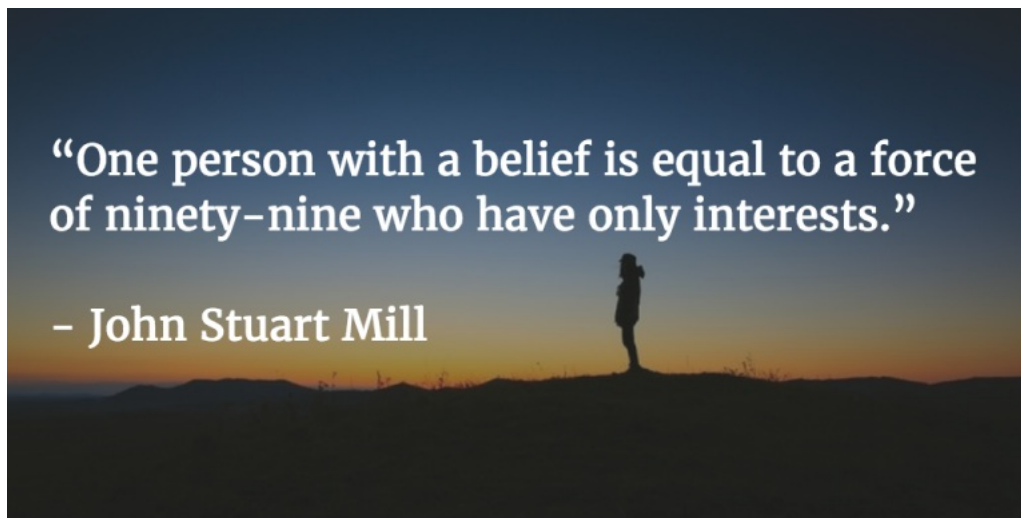
On Liberty Summary

 fourminutebooks.com/on-liberty-summary

1-Sentence-Summary: *On Liberty* is the philosophy classic that laid the foundation of modern liberal politics, by applying the concept of utilitarianism to societies and countries, in order to create a working system between authority and liberty.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Erik Torenberg from Product Hunt put me up to this one, so this summary is dedicated to him.

John Stuart Mill was the most influential English philosopher of the 19th century. He took an interest in civil rights, feminism and politics.

The maxims and principles laid out in his greatest work, *On Liberty*, would later become the foundation of what liberal politics are today.

1. Democracy alone does not guarantee personal freedom.
2. The only reason to limit liberty should be to save people from harm.
3. False opinions are not only good, they're important.

Let's take a stroll down politics lane!

Lesson 1: Democracy alone does not guarantee personal freedom.

Ancient Greece, England, pre-World War II Germany, Libya, Egypt, Cambodia – we all know plenty of cases of dictatorships and need not discuss the terrible consequences a single-leader tyranny can bring about.

Today we widely accept democracy as a useful tool to limit the power of political authorities by letting the people elect their political representatives.

But Mill says democracy alone still isn't enough to ensure personal liberty.

Why?

Because in this model, **the majority rules over the individual.**

Yes, the elected officials are what the majority wants, but that's not the same as allowing each individual to govern him- or herself.

Personal freedom can still be threatened in a democracy by something that he calls **social tyranny.**

This happens when the majority imposes their own opinions, views and beliefs on individuals who don't agree.

For example, while today a lot of religions are common and accepted in the US, as recently as 1950, 91% of all Americans were Christians.

It's easy to imagine that all people from other religions were often criticized, excluded and sometimes even prosecuted, just for holding a different belief than the majority.

So no, democracy alone won't solve all of our problems.

Lesson 2: It's only okay to limit people's freedom when you're trying to save them from harm.

One of the rational principles that Mill suggests we adopt in order to truly assure personal freedom is that we meddle in and limit other people's freedom only when the reason is that we want to save them or others from harm.

There are 3 possible scenarios where interference with personal freedom can prevent harm:

1. **Harm by default**
2. **Harm by omission**
3. **Harm by accident**

Some examples: Harm by default means a person is known to cause harm to him or herself or others under certain conditions. In that case, legal entities should restrict their freedom until said conditions are cleared. This could mean **punishing drug addicts with prison time, letting drunks sober up at the police station, or heavy fines for reckless drivers.**

Harm by omission could be bystanders watching a murder, or **tax evasion**. In this case the government should use certain government agencies, like the IRA, to enforce people's contribution to the greater good.

Harm by accident could literally mean **pulling someone away from a nearing train** and holding them back or catching a falling child, because it's safe to assume that the harm they would've endured was unintended.

These are scenarios in which limiting freedom would be okay, because it helps the greater good, but in the next lesson, it wouldn't.

Lesson 3: False opinions are good and important.

You would probably agree that we'd all be better off if people with radical opinions stopped spouting them around on Facebook, in public and at work.

But Mill says that's not only wrong, prohibiting false opinions would actually hurt our society.

He says it's important to be confronted with wrong and heavily controversial opinions, because **it gets society to think about if and why the common opinions are correct in the first place**.

If what you believe about gender equality wouldn't constantly be tested and argued against, you'd eventually just start accepting it as the norm, which would lead right back to the problem in lesson 1.

When we reduce our convictions and values to mere customs and stop questioning their reason, we simply mimic what everyone else is doing and they won't affect our character as much.

Never stop questioning yourself and challenging your own opinions. As billionaire partner of Warren Buffett, Charlie Munger would say:

I never allow myself to have an opinion on anything that I don't know the other side's argument better than they do. — Charlie Munger

On Liberty Review

I'm really glad I read this in summary form. The full text is available online for free, but if English isn't your first language, and you don't have studied politics, philosophy and history a lot before, you'll find it overwhelming.

The level of thought is incredible and it's very interesting to learn some of the thought patterns and ideas that precede what we consider to be the most evolved and modern form of governing countries.

On Liberty is not a light read for sure, but if you're taking an interest in any of the 3 above subjects, or just want to learn something that's really outside of the box, you can try to read the full text. If you find yourself giving up, try the summary on Blinkist.

What else can you learn from the blinks?

- Why only building laws and rules based on rational principles will lead to a society that truly provides personal liberty to all its individuals
- The reason why personal liberty isn't just useful for individuals, but also for society as a whole
- Where the right for everyone to do what they want has its limits and why people should be allowed to try and convince others, but society should never enforce common beliefs
- Why figuring out what counts as harm and what doesn't is tricky and how you prevent it matters
- How freedom of speech and thought are the most important drivers of finding truth

Who would I recommend the *On Liberty* summary to?

The 13 year old, who just picked up history as a subject in school, the 42 year old, politically ambitious member of any given party and anyone with an extreme opinion about a popular topic.

[Learn more about the author](#)

[Read the full book summary on Blinkist](#)

[Get the book on Amazon](#)