

## Introduction

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup> and notes<sup>2</sup> by F. Andrewes and J. Neild (2020)

John Stuart Mill's most famous contribution as a philosopher is to the concept of liberalism, which itself is one which lies at the heart of most western, liberal democracies (perhaps most clearly seen in the USA). Mill's book, *On liberty*, is one of the most influential texts on liberalism. At its heart liberalism holds a belief in the goodness and ability of human nature, and in the capacity and desirability of individuals to determine their own lives. Liberalism, in England, was a political philosophy that could be traced back to the political and religious upheavals of the seventeenth century, particularly to Protestant dissenters who struggled for freedom of individual conscience. It was also strongly influenced by the political theories of John Locke (1632-1704), who asserted that individuals were free by their nature, and as such were justified in their struggles against those (principally governments) who tried to deprive them of their natural rights to life, property, and liberty.

Equally important, and closer in time to Mill, was the development of economic liberalism. Drawing particularly on the writings of the Scottish economist and philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790), economic liberals argued the economy should be left to operate along natural lines without any form of government regulation or protection and were strong advocates of free trade.

Drawing on these two interconnected paths, liberals in the subsequent centuries argued against what they saw as the overbearing role of the state in regulating the lives of individuals, particularly where the state interfered with an individual's right of free expression or attempted to curb an individual's self-determination. To safeguard against this, liberals called for clear, written constitutions that granted individual rights and gave protection against state interference. Believing also that governments that took their authority from the consent of the people were least likely to attempt to control individual freedoms, liberalism became associated with democratic movements (although its adherents did not always accept full democracy). In general, liberals believed that best government was the one that governed least: in other words, that did not involve itself either in the economics of the nation or in the private life and beliefs of the individual citizens.

When Mill began his examination of liberalism, in the mid-nineteenth century, Britain was the most powerful and most industrialised nation on earth, its wealth and influence a product, in part, of the endeavours of economic liberals. But it was becoming increasingly apparent that this power had come at the price of the harsh and miserable conditions of many industrial workers. It was in this climate that Mill wrote, *On liberty* (1859). He sought to form a more socially conscious and humane version. He outlined a progressive liberalism, one that redrew the boundaries of the individual and the state, as well as providing an important criticism of traditional ideas of *laissez-faire*.

<sup>1</sup> Refer to this introduction in your essay as (Andrewes & Neild, 2020, p. 4). List in your reference list as Andrewes, F & Neild, J 2020, Introduction and notes to Mill essay, Trinity College Foundation Studies, Melbourne.

<sup>2</sup> In the case of footnotes accompanying the primary source, the authors are also Andrewes & Neild. To reference in your essay, give the footnote number preceded by the letter 'n' as well as the page number. For example (Andrewes & Neild, 2020, p. 4, n. 3). List it in your reference list (if you have not already done so) as Andrewes, F. & Neild, J. (2020). Introduction and notes to Mill essay. Melbourne: Trinity College Foundation Studies.

- John Stuart Mill
  - philosopher
  - most famous contribution: concept of liberalism
- Liberalism
  - is in most western, liberal democracies
  - belief in the goodness and ability of human nature and in the capacity and desirability of individuals to determine their own lives
  - In England
    - a political philosophy
    - traced back to political and religious upheavals of the 17th century
      - Protestant dissenters - struggled for freedom of individual conscience
    - strongly influenced by John Locke
- John Locke (1632-1704)
  - asserted that individuals were free by their nature
  - justified in their struggles against those (principally governments) who tried to deprive them of their natural rights to life, property and liberty
- Adam Smith (1723-1790)
  - economic liberalism
    - economy should be left to operate along natural lines without any form of government regulation or protection
    - strong advocates of free trade
- Liberals
  - drew ideas from Locke and Smith
  - argued against overbearing role of the state in regulating the lives of individuals
  - particularly where the state interfered with an individual's right of free expression or attempted to curb an individual's self-determination
  - call for clear, written constitutions that granted individual rights and gave protection against state interference
  - associated with democratic movements
    - although its adherents did not always accept full democracy
  - believed that best government was the one that governed least
    - did not involve itself either in the economics of the nation
    - did not involve itself in the private life and beliefs of the individual citizens
- the climate of Mill's writing
  - mid-19th century
  - Britain
    - most powerful and most industrialised nation on earth
    - wealth and influence a product
      - in part, of the endeavours of economic liberals
    - this power came at a price
      - harsh and miserable conditions of many individual workers
  - Mill sought to form a more socially conscious and humane version
  - Outlined progressive liberalism
    - redrew the boundaries of the individual and the state
    - providing an important criticism of traditional ideas of *laissez-faire*
      - *laissez-faire* : a doctrine opposing governmental interference in economic affairs beyond the minimum necessary for the maintenance of peace and property rights
- On Liberty
  - one of the most influential texts on liberalism