

History Access Reading Group

Meet with Professor JON BRIDGMAN to discuss John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

Monday, November 22 and Monday, December 6
1:30 in Smith 306

This book is widely available at most bookstores in inexpensive editions (Dover, Penguin) and online (<http://www.bartleby.com/130/>).

John Stuart Mill is one of the few indisputably classic authors in the history of political thought. *On Liberty*, first published in 1851, has become celebrated as the most powerful defense of the freedom of the individual and it is now widely regarded as the most important theoretical foundation for Liberalism as a political creed. According to Mill, “The subject of this Essay is not the so-called Liberty of the Will, so unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of Philosophical Necessity; but Civil, or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual. A question seldom stated, and hardly ever discussed, in general terms, but which profoundly influences the practical controversies of the age by its latent presence, and is likely soon to make itself recognized as the vital question of the future.”

Please sign up for this group by visiting our website and clicking on the RSVP button or contacting History Undergraduate Advising (543-5691, histadv@u.washington.edu):

<http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/access/reading.html>

Study Questions for the first session:

*In this session we will examine Mill's argument (based to be sure on a truncated reading of *On Liberty*).*

1. "A question...likely soon to make itself recognized as the vital question of the future." Was Mill right?
2. "But, in political and philosophic theories, as well as in persons, success discloses faults and infirmities which failure might have concealed from observation." To what nation does he refer?
3. "The tyranny of the majority." One of Mill's central ideas—what precisely does it mean?
4. "...the magical influence of custom, which is not only, as the proverb says a second nature, but is continually mistaken for the first." How does custom (opinion) differ from fact? Why is it so difficult to differentiate the two?
5. How does Mill evaluate the role of Christianity in the evolution of human freedom?
6. "...the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of any of their number is self-protection." Discuss the ramifications of this dictum.
7. "...I forgo any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right as a thing independent of utility." Why is Mill willing to forgo this advantage?
8. "If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person of a 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?
9. "...the majority of eminent men of every past generation held many opinions now known to be erroneous..." Is this true of our own times?
10. How does Mill answer the argument that free speech is all very well as long as it is not carried to an extreme?

Study questions for the second session:

This session will take up the practical application of Mill's principles.

1. Do radio, television, and the internet raise questions which Mill never considered?
2. Would Mill approve of a ban on "hate speech"?
3. Would Mill approve of a total ban on smoking?
4. Would Mill defend the current flood of "R"-rated movies?
5. In Canada there is a law forbidding publications which deny that the Holocaust took place. Mill's reaction?
6. Have you ever experienced the tyranny of the majority? Have you ever been part of the majority?
7. And many, many more...