

TITLE: John Stuart Mill's Freedom of Expression:
A Critical Study

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Abstract

This research demonstrated that Mill's freedom of expression is a tolerant, liberal position that is progressive in essence and upholds a dialogical, pluralistic spirit. Mill's freedom of expression is central to his liberalism and promotes a strong sense of individuality. He claims that there should be absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects—practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological. He also reinforces his position by stating that if all humankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, humankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he (if he had the power) would be justified in silencing humankind.

Mill provides *four arguments* to support his position: the human fallibility argument; the necessity-of-error argument; the pursuit-of-truth argument; and the synthetic truth argument. In addition, he provides responses to criticism of these arguments. After presenting these arguments, Mill claims that since people receive the protection of society, they owe certain conduct in return. Thus he does not support unbridled freedom of expression without any limits. The limitation he places on free expression is "one very simple principle", now commonly called the Harm Principle,

which states that the only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

A variety of critics have put forward six main *counter-arguments* on Mill's stands on: inequality; self-regarding acts; individuality; epistemological complications; the downplaying of the harm principle; and the insufficiency of the harm principle.

Equality, immunity of self-regarding acts, liberating individuality, an epistemological stance, and the sufficiency of liberty (or the harm principle): these are the main elements of Mill's liberal thought on freedom of expression. His position is a tolerant, liberal one because it supports a liberal society where individuals tolerate differing and opposing opinions on all subjects. Thus different views on any subject are treated equally and dialogically where a pluralistic spirit works and where people are left with their choices after every opinion on any subject is allowed to be told and heard. The responses to six main counter-arguments here recognize Mill's milieu in understanding his transitional nature, the difference between his *positions* and *steps*, and between his long-term goals and short-term remedies. More important, appreciating his position on freedom of expression that he defends so rigorously and that he thinks a civilized nation should embrace is worthy of study.