

John Stuart Mill: Summary



Although it was written after the Constitution, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) is considered to be one of the greatest defenses of free speech and individuality ever written, and some of its central premises have been embraced by the Supreme Court in its rulings on the First Amendment. Among other things, *On Liberty* expressed Mill's worry that prevailing opinion in society can have the unhealthy effect of silencing dissenting voices, and advocated for humility in assessing our own systems of belief and in considering points of view different from our own.

1. Mill argued that an individual who is eccentric, or a non-conformist (i.e., someone who acts or speaks differently than most people) is very valuable to society. A society with many eccentrics is usually a society with a high amount of genius, mental vigor, and moral courage.
2. That is because, although most non-conformists are probably wrong, a few of them are geniuses. If we silence all non-conformists, then we silence the geniuses as well.
3. He also stated that a person cannot truly understand his own opinions, and the best arguments in favor of them, unless he hears the opinions of those who disagree with him. In fact, a person who only hears one side of an issue has no legitimate reason to have an opinion on either side.
4. He said that if every human being but one had the same opinion of an issue, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, the majority would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than that one person would be justified in silencing everyone else.
5. Also, he says, if one opinion is silenced, then everyone else suffers, in two ways. If the opinion is right, everyone else is deprived of the opportunity of learning the truth. If the opinion is wrong, everyone else loses the chance to see more clearly how true their own views are.
6. Therefore, he says, "[e]very man who says frankly and fully what he thinks is so far doing a public service. We should be grateful to him for attacking most unsparingly our most cherished opinions."
7. Mill defined freedom as the ability of each person to pursue the kind of life that he or she thinks is best for himself or herself, as long as he or she does not attempt to deprive other people of the ability to pursue the kinds of life that they want.
8. Mill argued that a person cannot be a great thinker unless he or she believes that he or she must follow the evidence to whatever conclusion it leads to, even if he or she does not like the conclusion.
9. He also argued that the greatest danger to individual liberty does not come from the government, but from those who make up the majority of society, because they can use shame and social ostracism to make people afraid to ever say something that might be unpopular. That sort of shame and social ostracism is worse than being put in jail, so society is a bigger threat to the individual than government is.