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John Stuart Mill *On Liberty* (1859)

**Lecture 4:**

**Applications of Mill's Principle**

presented by William Arthurs  
Khazar University, March 2007

website for these lectures:  
[www.MillOnLiberty.org.uk](http://www.MillOnLiberty.org.uk)



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Slide 2:

**What part of human life should be the individual's responsibility, and what part should be society's responsibility?**

According to Mill, the part of life in which the individual is interested should belong to individuality. The part of life which mostly interests society should belong to society.



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### **A possible argument against Mill's view:**

Some say it is not possible to separate the part of a person's life which concerns only himself, and the part which concerns others.

“No man is an island.” (No-one is entirely isolated.)  
Society cannot be indifferent to any individual's conduct.



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### **More arguments against Mill's view:**

The protection which Mill offers to children (against the consequences of their actions) should also be given to adults who cannot manage their own affairs.

If all agree that an activity is damaging to human happiness, it should simply be banned by the government and condemned by public opinion.  
Examples: gambling, drunkenness, the vice trade.



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### **Mill's response to these arguments:**

When the law or public opinion interferes in such matters of personal conduct, it usually does so wrongly.

Examples given by Mill: religious prohibitions enforced by law and custom.

*Deorum injuria Diis curae* (Latin) - "Injustices to the Gods are the business of the Gods" (and not of humans, or the law)



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### **Mill's rules for applying his principle:**

- 1) An individual is not accountable to society for his actions insofar as those actions concern no-one other than himself;
- 2) But he is accountable for any actions that injure others' interests, and he may be subject to social or legal condemnation if, in society's opinion, this is necessary for the protection of society.



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## **Free trade**

Mill defines the doctrine of free trade, under which the cheapness and quality of goods are best provided for leaving buyers and sellers completely and equally free to transact business.

The principle of liberty is not concerned with free trade, and is not relevant when deciding the limits of free trade (eg regulation to protect the consumer against fraud by adulteration, or to protect the health and safety of employees).



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## **The sale of poisonous substances**

How far may liberty be invaded in order to prevent crimes or accidents?

Mill argues that his principle would state that it is legitimate to warn buyers of the dangerous nature of the substance, and also for the seller to record details of the transaction and of the buyer.



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## **Slavery**

Mill points out that in civilised countries, any agreement whereby someone sells himself into slavery is null and void. It is inconsistent with the principle of liberty to allow someone to agree to deny himself freedom in the future. The principle of freedom cannot require that someone should be free not to be free.



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### **Marriage and the support of a family**

The laws in some European countries, which then forbade marriage unless the would-be husband and wife could prove that they could support a family, are not against Mill's principle of liberty, Mill argues.

Comment:

Should the state be trusted with such an intrusive power?



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## **Education and qualifications**

Mill states that children's education should be compulsory by law, and should be tested by state examinations from an early age.

These examinations should not test matters of opinion but only factual/ scientific matters.

The state must not require particular qualifications for entry to, for example, teaching or the medical profession.



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**THE END**

Thank you for your attention!