

John Stuart Mills Neo-Liberalism

John Stuart Mills *On Liberty* is commonly taken to be a defense of classical liberalism. This understanding is based on an interpretation of Mills harm principle that I term the political interpretation: the view that the harm principle is a limitation on coercion, narrowly defined. I argue for an interpretation I term the social interpretation of the harm principle, according to which the harm principle is equally a restriction on certain types of social pressure. Mills principle lends support to such neo-liberal policies as restrictions on hiring/firing decisions, governmental support for art and ideas, and (arguably) restrictions on hate speech.

Not only does Mill consistently equate the moral coercion of public opinion and legal penalties, Mills discussion of the progress of the concept of liberty makes it clear that his chief purpose the conceptual gap in previous thinkers which he intends to fill is subsume protection from public opinion under the concept of liberty.

In many respects, Mill considers social pressure to be more dangerous than governmental coercion. This is primarily because, whereas governmental action tends to produce resistance, people naturally desire social acceptance.

On Liberty is intended to bring the benefits of a vibrant culture of debate and discussion, while avoiding the tendency for debate to harden into sectarianism. To accomplish this, Mill thinks, requires protection from not only coercion, but the moral coercion of public opinion.

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