

Harm, Self-Regarding Conduct and Liberty: Understanding Mill's Harm Principle

In an influential article titled, "A Re-Reading of Mill on Liberty," J.C. Rees defends Mill against criticisms surrounding his concept of self-regarding conduct. Mill suggests that there are no actions which are purely self-regarding and yet, it seems clear that in order for the Liberty Principle to successfully demarcate a sphere of individual liberty, there must be a set of actions which are self-regarding. Rees argues that to understand the self-regarding/other-regarding distinction in a way that dissolves this apparent tension, we must situate it against the background of those actions that affect the *interests* of others; where an action can affect a person without affecting her interests. Even though Rees's interpretation has been widely accepted in the literature, I myself am not convinced that his resolution to the problem would satisfy Mill. The project of my paper then is to explicate Mill's concept of self-regarding activity in such a way as to answer to the above tension as well as make it the case the self-regarding activity is understood merely as an action that does not have any direct effects extending to others. This requires explicating Mill's account of the direct/indirect effect distinction and the public/private act distinction.

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