

Liberty

John Stuart Mill

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between square brackets in normal-sized type.

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Contents

| | |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Liberty of thought and discussion | 10 |
| Chapter 3: Individuality—one of the elements of well-being | 36 |
| Chapter 4: The limits to the authority of society over the individual | 49 |
| Chapter 5: Applications | 61 |
| ·Free trade· | 62 |
| ·Selling poisons· | 62 |
| ·Selling alcohol· | 64 |
| ·Prostitution and gambling· | 65 |
| ·Dissuasion· | 66 |
| ·Contracts—slavery· | 67 |

| | |
|------------------------------------------|----|
| ·Contracts—marriage· | 68 |
| ·Power of husbands over wives· | 68 |
| ·Bringing up children· | 69 |
| ·Having children· | 71 |
| ·Size of government· | 72 |

Chapter 1: Introduction

The subject of this essay is *not* the so-called 'liberty of the will' that is unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of philosophical necessity; ·i.e. I shan't be writing about anything like the issue between free-will and determinism·. My topic is

•civil or •social liberty—the nature and limits of the power that society can legitimately exercise over the individual.

This question is seldom posed, and almost never discussed, in general terms. Yet it lurks behind many of the practical controversies of our day, profoundly influencing them, and is likely soon to make itself recognized as the vital question of the future. This isn't a new issue; indeed, it has in a certain sense divided mankind almost from the remotest ages; but in the stage of progress into which the more civilized parts of humanity have now entered, it comes up under new conditions and needs a different and more fundamental treatment.

The struggle between liberty and authority is the most conspicuous feature of the parts of history of which we have the oldest records, particularly in the histories of Greece, Rome, and England. But in olden times this contest was between subjects (or some classes of them) and the government. By 'liberty' was meant *protection against the tyranny of the political rulers*. Except in some of the democratic governments of Greece, the rulers were seen as inevitably being antagonists of the people whom they ruled. The rulers consisted of a single governing person or a governing tribe or caste •who derived their authority from inheritance or conquest, or at any rate didn't have it through the consent of the governed, and •whose supremacy men

didn't risk challenging (and perhaps didn't want to challenge), whatever precautions might be taken against its being used oppressively. Their power was regarded as necessary, but also as highly dangerous because it was a weapon that they would try to use against their subjects as much as against external enemies. To prevent the weaker members of the community from being preyed on by innumerable vultures, there needed to be a predator stronger than the rest, whose job was to keep the vultures down. But as the •king of the vultures would be just as intent on preying on the flock as would any of the •minor predators, the subjects *had to* be in a perpetual attitude of defence against his beak and claws. So the aim of patriots was to set •limits to the power that the ruler should be allowed to have over the community; and this •limitation was what they meant by 'liberty'. They tried to get it in two ways. •First, by getting certain political 'liberties' or 'rights' to be recognized; if the ruler were to infringe these, that would be regarded as a breach of duty, and specific resistance or general rebellion would be regarded as justifiable. •A second procedure—generally a later one—was to establish constitutional checks according to which some of the governing power's more important acts required the consent of the community or of a body of some sort supposed to represent the community's interests. In most European countries the ruling power was compelled, more or less, to submit to •the first of these kinds of limitation. Not so with •the second; and the principal objective of the lovers of liberty everywhere came to be getting this ·constitutional limit on the rulers' power· or, when they already had it to some extent, achieving it more completely. And so long as mankind were content to fight off one enemy with help from

another enemy, and to be ruled by a master on condition that they had a fairly effective guarantee against his tyranny, they didn't try for anything more than this.

But a time came in the progress of human affairs when men stopped thinking it to be a necessity of nature that their governors should be an independent power with interests opposed to their own. It appeared to them much better that the various officers of the state should be their *appointees*, their *delegates*, who could be called back from office at the people's pleasure. Only in that way, it seemed, could people be completely assured that the powers of government would never be misused to their disadvantage. This new demand to have rulers who were elected and temporary became the prominent aim of the democratic party, wherever any such party existed, and to a large extent it replaced the previous efforts to limit the power of rulers. As the struggle proceeded for making the ruling power come from the periodical choice of the ruled, some people started to think that too much importance had been attached to limiting the power itself. The thought was this:

Limitations on the power of government is something to be used against rulers whose interests are habitually opposed to those of the people. What we now want is for the rulers to be identified with the people, for their interests and decisions to be the interests and decisions of the nation. The nation doesn't need to be protected against its own will! There is no fear of its tyrannizing over itself. As long as the rulers are responsible to the nation and easily removable by it, it can afford to trust them with power. . . . The rulers' power is simply the nation's own power, concentrated and in a form convenient for use.

This way of thinking, or perhaps rather of feeling, was common among the last generation of European liberal-

ism, and apparently it still predominates in Europe outside Britain. Those who admit any limit to what may be done by a government (setting aside governments that they think oughtn't to exist) stand out as brilliant exceptions among the political thinkers of continental Europe. A similar attitude might by now have been prevalent in our own country, if the circumstances that for a time encouraged it hadn't changed.

But in political and philosophical theories, as well as in persons, success reveals faults and weaknesses that failure might have hidden from view. The notion that the people needn't limit their power over themselves might seem axiomatic at a time when democratic government was only dreamed of, or read about as having existed in the distant past. And that notion wasn't inevitably disturbed by such temporary aberrations as those of the French Revolution, the worst of which were the work of a few usurpers—people who grabbed power without being entitled to it—and which in any case didn't come from the permanent working of institutions among the people but from a sudden explosion against monarchical and aristocratic despotism. In time, however, a democratic republic came to occupy a large part of the earth's surface, and made itself felt as one of the most powerful members of the community of nations; and elected and responsible government became subject to the scrutiny and criticisms that any great existing *fact* is likely to draw on itself. It was now seen that such phrases as 'self-government', and 'the people's power over themselves' don't express the true state of the case. The 'people' who exercise the power aren't always the ones over whom it is exercised, and the 'self-government' spoken of is the government not of each by himself but of each by all the rest. The will of the people in practice means the will of

the most numerous or the most active part of the people;

that is,

the •majority, or •those who get themselves to be accepted as the majority.

So 'the people' may desire to oppress some of their number; and precautions are as much needed against this as against any other abuse of power. Thus, the limitation of government's power of over individuals loses none of its importance when the holders of power are regularly accountable to the community, i.e. to the strongest party in it. This view of things recommends itself equally to •the intelligence of thinkers and to •the desires of the important groups in European society to whose real or supposed interests democracy is adverse; so it has had no difficulty in establishing itself, and in political theorizing 'the tyranny of the majority' is now generally included among the evils that society should guard against.

Like other tyrannies, the tyranny of the majority was at first feared primarily as something that would operate through the acts of the public authorities, and this is how the man in the street still sees it. But thoughtful people saw that •society itself can be the tyrant—society collectively tyrannizing over individuals within it—and that •*this* kind of tyranny isn't restricted to what society can do through the acts of its political government. Society can and does enforce its own commands; and if it issues wrong commands instead of right, or *any* commands on matters that it oughtn't to meddle with at all, it practises a *social* tyranny that is more formidable than many kinds of political oppression. Although it isn't usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life and enslaving the soul itself. So protection against the tyranny of government isn't enough; there needs to be protection also against the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society

to turn its own ideas and practices into rules of conduct, and impose them—by means other than legal penalties—on those who dissent from them; to hamper the development and if possible to prevent the formation of any individuality that isn't in harmony with *its* ways. . . . **There is a limit to how far collective opinion can legitimately interfere with individual independence;** and finding and defending that limit is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs as is protection against political despotism.

But though this proposition isn't likely to be disputed in general terms, the practical question of *where* to place the limit—how to make the right adjustment between individual independence and social control—is a subject on which nearly all the work remains to be done. Everything that makes life worth living for anyone depends on restraints being put on the actions of other people. So *some* rules of conduct must be imposed—in the first place by law, and secondarily by •public• opinion on many things that aren't fit subjects for law to work on. What should these rules be? That is the principal question in human affairs; but with a few obvious exceptions it is one of the questions that least progress has been made in resolving. It hasn't been answered in the same way in any two historical periods, and hardly ever in two countries •in the same period•; and the answer of one period or country is a source of amazement to another. Yet the people in any given country at any given time don't see any problem here; it's as though they believed that mankind had always been agreed on what the rules should be. The rules that hold in *their* society appear to them to be self-evident and self-justifying. This almost universal illusion is one example of the magical influence of *custom*. . . . The effect of custom in preventing any doubts concerning the rules of conduct that mankind impose on one another is made all the more complete by the fact that

this isn't something that is generally considered to call for *reasons*—whether to be given by one person to others or by a person to himself. People are accustomed to believe that on topics like this their feelings are better than reasons, and make it unnecessary to have reasons. (And some who like to think of themselves as philosophers have encouraged them in this.) The practical principle that leads them to their opinions on how human beings should behave is the *feeling* in each person's mind that everybody should be required to act as he, and those who feel as he does, would *like* them to act. Of course no-one admits to himself that his standard of judgment is *what he likes*; but when an opinion on how people should behave isn't supported by reasons, it can count only as one person's *preference*; and if 'reasons' are given, and turn out to be a mere appeal to a similar preference felt by other people, it is still only many people's *liking* instead of one person's. To an ordinary man, however, his own preference (with other people sharing it) is not only a perfectly satisfactory reason but is the *only* reason he has for most of his notions of morality, taste, or propriety—except for notions that are explicitly written in his religious creed, and even that is something he interprets mainly in the light of his personal preferences.

So men's opinions about what is praiseworthy or blamable are affected by all the various causes that influence •their wishes concerning the conduct of others, and these causes are as numerous as those that influence •their wishes on any other subject. It may be any of these:

their reason,
 their prejudices or superstitions,
 their social feelings,
 their antisocial feelings—envy or jealousy, arrogance or contempt,
 their desires or fears for themselves—their legitimate or illegitimate self-interest.

The last of these is the commonest.

In any country that has a dominant class, a large portion of the morality of *the country* emanates from *that class*—from its interests and its feelings of class superiority. The morality between Spartans and slave-warriors, between planters and negroes, between monarchs and subjects, between nobles and peasants, between men and women, has mostly been created by these class interests and feelings: and the sentiments thus generated react back on the moral feelings of the members of the dominant class in their relations among themselves. [In Mill's time, 'sentiment' could mean 'feeling' or 'opinion'.] On the other hand, where a class has *lost* its dominant position, or where its dominance is unpopular, the prevailing moral sentiments frequently show the marks of an impatient dislike of superiority.

Rules of conduct—both •positive and •negative—that have been enforced by law or opinion have also been influenced by mankind's servile attitude towards the supposed •likes or •dislikes of their worldly masters or of their gods. This servility is essentially selfish, but it isn't hypocrisy: it gives rise to perfectly genuine sentiments of abhorrence, such as have made men burn magicians and heretics.

Along with so many baser influences, the general and obvious interests of society have of course had a share—a large share—in the direction of the moral sentiments. But they have played this role not so much

by serving directly as reasons for this or that moral view.

as by

causing various likes and dislikes which *lead to* this or that moral view.

And *other* likes and dislikes—ones having little or nothing to do with the interests of society—have made themselves felt in the establishment of moralities with quite as much force as the former ones.

The likes and dislikes of society, or of some powerful part of it, are thus the main thing that has in practice determined the rules that societies have laid down for general observance under the penalties of law or opinion. And those who have been ahead of society in thought and feeling have generally not attacked this state of things in principle, however much they may have clashed with some of its details. They have been busier inquiring into what things society ought to like or dislike than in questioning whether society's likes or dislikes should be a law for individuals. They have tried to alter the feelings of mankind on the particular points on which they were themselves heretical—i.e. out of step with society—rather than making common cause in defence of freedom with heretics generally.

The only case in which the higher ground has been taken on principle and maintained with consistency by more than a few individuals is that of religious belief. And this is instructive in many ways, partly because it provides a most striking instance of the fallibility of what is called the 'moral sense'. It really is the *moral* sense that is involved, for the religious hatred felt by a sincere bigot is one of the most unambiguous cases of *moral* feeling. Those who first broke the yoke of what called itself the 'universal church' were in general no more willing to permit difference of religious

opinion than was that church itself. [This refers to the first protestants and to the Roman Catholic Church.] But when the heat of the conflict was over, without giving a complete victory to any party, and each church or sect saw that the most it could hope for was to keep possession of the ground it already occupied, minorities were compelled to plead to those whom they could not convert for *permission to differ*; they *had* to do this because they saw that they had no chance of becoming majorities. So it is on this battle-field, and hardly anywhere else, that the rights of the individual against society have been asserted on broad grounds of principle, with the claim of society to exercise authority over dissentients being openly challenged. The great writers to whom the world owes what religious liberty it possesses have mostly asserted *freedom of conscience* as a right that can't be taken away, and totally denied that a human being is accountable to others for his religious belief. Yet so natural to mankind is intolerance in whatever they really care about that religious freedom has hardly anywhere existed in practice, except where religious indifference—which dislikes having its peace disturbed by theological quarrels—has added its weight to the scale on the side of tolerance. In the minds of almost all religious persons, even in the most tolerant countries, the duty of toleration is admitted with unspoken reservations:

- One person will put up with dissent in matters of church government, but not of dogma.
- Another can tolerate anyone except a Roman catholic or a unitarian.
- A third tolerates everyone who believes in revealed religion but not those whose religious beliefs are based on arguments and evidence rather than on revelation.
- A few extend their charity a little further, but won't tolerate those who don't believe in a God and in a

future state.

Wherever the sentiment of the majority is still genuine and intense, it is found not to have weakened *much* its claim to be obeyed.

Because of the peculiar circumstances of English political history, though the yoke of •opinion here may be heavier than it is in most other countries of Europe, our yoke of •law is lighter . Here there is considerable resentment of direct interference with private conduct by the legislative or the executive power; though this comes not so much from any •proper respect for the independence of the individual as from the lingering habit of •seeing the government as representing an opposite interest to that of the public. The majority haven't yet learned to feel the power of the government as being *their* power, or its opinions as being *their* opinions. When they do so, individual liberty will probably be as vulnerable to invasion from the government as it already is from public opinion. But up to now there has been a considerable amount of feeling ready to be brought into action against any attempt by the law to control individuals in respects in which they haven't been controlled by it in the past. This happens with very little careful thought about whether or not the matter is within the *legitimate* sphere of legal control; so that the feeling against government interference, highly beneficial as it is on the whole, may be quite as often misplaced as well grounded in the particular instances of its application.

There is, in fact, no recognized principle that is generally used to decide whether a given item of government interference is proper. People decide ·in individual cases· according to their personal preferences. Some, whenever they see any good to be done or evil to be remedied, are willing for the government to do something about it, while others would rather put up with almost any amount of social

evil than add one to the areas of human life that are subject to governmental control. And men align themselves on one side or the other in any particular case according to

- this general direction (·for or against governmental control·) of their sentiments, or to
- how much they feel their own interests to be involved in the matter in question, or to
- whether they think that the government would settle the matter in the way they prefer;

but very rarely on the basis of

- any firm, considered opinion concerning what things are fit to be done by a government.

And it seems to me that because of this absence of rule or principle, one side is wrong as often as the other; the interference of government is with about equal frequency improperly supported and improperly condemned.

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle and to argue that it should absolutely govern how society deals with its individual members in matters involving compulsion and control, whether through physical force in the form of legal penalties or through the moral coercion of public opinion. The principle is this:

The only end for which people are entitled, individually or collectively, to interfere with the liberty of action of any of their number is self-protection. The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.

The person's own good, whether physical or moral, isn't a sufficient ground ·for interference with his conduct·. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do (not do) something because doing it (not doing it) •would be better for him, •would make him happier, •would be wise (in the opinions of others), or •would be right. These are good reasons for

protesting to him, reasoning with him, persuading him, or begging him, but not for compelling him or giving him a hard time if he acts otherwise. To justify that—i.e. to justify compulsion or punishment—the conduct from which it is desired to deter him must be likely to bring harm to someone else. The only part of anyone’s conduct for which he is answerable to society is the part that concerns others. In the part that concerns himself alone he is entitled to absolute independence. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.

I hardly need say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings when they have reached the age of maturity. We aren’t speaking of children, or of young persons below the age that the law fixes as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who still need to be taken care of by others must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason, we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as not yet adult. The early difficulties in the way of spontaneous progress are so great that there is seldom any choice of means for overcoming them; and a ruler full of the spirit of improvement may legitimately use any means that will attain an end that perhaps can’t be reached otherwise. Despotism is a legitimate form of government in dealing with barbarians, provided that •it aims at improving things and •it uses means that actually do bring improvement. Liberty, as a principle, doesn’t apply to any state of affairs before mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion. Until then, there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one—i.e. to find a despot so wise. But in all the nations with which we need to concern ourselves here, the people long ago became able to be guided

to self-improvement by conviction or persuasion; and once that stage has been reached, compulsion—whether direct physical compulsion or compulsion through penalties for non-compliance—is no longer admissible as a means to their own good, and is justifiable only for the security of others.

It might seem easier for me to defend my position if I took this stance:

‘It is just objectively abstractly *right* that people should be free; never mind what the consequences of their freedom are.’

But I don’t argue in that way, because I hold that the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions is to *utility*—i.e. to ‘what the consequences are’. However, it must be utility in the broadest sense, based on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being. Those interests, I contend, make it all right to subject individual spontaneity to external control *only* in respect to those actions of each individual that concern the interests of *other* people. If anyone does something harmful to others, there is a prima facie case for punishing him—either by law or, where legal penalties are not safely applicable, by general disapproval. There are also many positive acts for the benefit of others that an individual may rightfully be compelled to perform:

to give evidence in a court of justice,
to do his fair share in the defence of his country, or
any other joint work necessary to the interests of the
society whose protection he enjoys;

and to perform certain acts of individual beneficence. For example, a man may rightfully be held to account by society for not saving a fellow-creature’s life, or not protecting a defenceless person against ill-treatment, in situations where it was obviously his duty to do this. A person may cause harm to others not only by his •actions but by his •inaction, and either way he is justly accountable to them for the harm.

The latter case, it is true, requires a much more cautious exercise of compulsion than the former. To make someone answerable for *doing harm* to others is the *rule*; to make him answerable for *not preventing harm* is, comparatively speaking, the *exception*. Yet there are many cases clear enough and serious enough to justify that exception. In everything concerning the external relations of the individual, he is legally answerable to those whose interests are concerned, and if necessary to society as their protector. There are often good reasons for not holding him to that responsibility; but these reasons must arise from special features of the case: either

- it is a kind of case where he is likely to act better when left to himself than when controlled in any way that society could control him; or
- the attempt to exercise control would have bad effects greater than those that it would prevent.

When such reasons as these rule out the enforcement of responsibility, the person's own conscience should move into the vacant judgment-seat and protect those interests of others that have no external protection; judging himself all the more severely because the case doesn't admit of his being made accountable to the judgment of his fellow-creatures.

But there is a sphere of action in which the interests of society, as distinct from those of the individual, are involved only indirectly if they are involved at all: it is the sphere containing all the part of the individual's life and conduct that affects only himself, or affects others but only with their free, voluntary, and undeceived consent and participation. When I say 'affects only himself' I am talking about the direct and immediate effects of his conduct. This has to be stipulated, for whatever affects himself may affect others *through* himself. (Conduct may be objected to on that ground; I'll consider this later.)

So this is the appropriate region of human liberty. I map it as containing three provinces. (1) The inward domain of consciousness, demanding liberty of conscience in the broadest sense, liberty of thought and feeling, absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or theoretical, scientific, moral, or theological, and liberty of expressing and publishing opinions. This last may seem to belong under a different principle, since it involves conduct of an individual that affects other people; but it can't in practice be separated from the liberty of thought—it is almost as important as the latter and rests in great part on the same reasons. (2) Liberty of tastes and pursuits, of shaping our life to suit our own character, of doing what we like. . . .—all this without hindrance from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do doesn't harm them even though they may think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong. (3) Following from the first two domains of liberty, there is the liberty, within the same limits, of individuals to come together, their freedom to unite for any purpose not involving harm to others—always supposing that the people in question are of full age and aren't being forced or deceived.

No society in which these liberties are not mainly respected is free, whatever form of government it has; and none is *completely* free in which they don't exist absolute and unqualified. The only freedom that deserves the name is the freedom to pursue our own good in our own way, so long as we don't try to deprive others of their good or hinder their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health of body, mind, and spirit. Mankind gain more from allowing each other to live in the way that seems good to themselves than they would from compelling each to live in the way that seems good to the rest.

This doctrine is far from new, and it may strike some as a mere truism; but in fact there is no doctrine that stands

more directly opposed to the general tendency of existing opinion and practice! Society has put as much effort into trying (according to its lights) to compel people to conform to its notions of •personal excellence as into trying to compel them to conform to its notions of •social excellence. The ancient commonwealths thought (and the ancient philosophers agreed) that every part of private conduct could rightly be regulated by public authority, on the ground that the state's welfare involved the whole bodily and mental discipline of every one of its citizens. This way of thinking may have been admissible in small republics surrounded by powerful enemies, in constant peril of being pulled down by foreign attack or internal upheavals, so that even a short period of relaxation and leaving the people to themselves might easily be fatal—so easily that they couldn't afford to wait for the beneficial permanent effects of freedom. In the modern world two factors have prevented the law from interfering so greatly in the details of private life: •the greater size of political communities, and above all •the separation between the spiritual and temporal authority, .i.e. between church and state., which placed the direction of men's consciences in other hands than those that controlled their worldly affairs. But the engines of *moral* .as distinct from *political*. repression that have been wielded against divergence from the prevailing opinion .and attitudes. have put less energy into this with regard to •social matters than with regard to •personal, private., self-regarding conduct. A reason for this is that religion, which is the most powerful of the elements that have contributed to forming moral feeling, has almost always been governed either by •the ambition of a hierarchy, seeking control over every department of human conduct, or by the •spirit of puritanism. .But that isn't the whole story, for some of the modern reformers who have placed themselves in strongest opposition to the religions of the

past have been right up there with the churches and sects in their assertion of the right to spiritual domination. A prime example is M. Comte, whose social system as set out in his *Système de Politique Positive* aims at establishing (though by moral more than by legal pressures) a despotism of society over the individual that surpasses anything contemplated in the political ideal of the most rigid disciplinarian among the ancient philosophers!

Apart from the special views of individual thinkers, there is also in the world at large an increasing inclination to stretch unduly the powers of society over the individual, both through the force of opinion and even through that of legislation; and because the tendency of all the changes taking place in the world is to strengthen society and lessen the power of the individual, this encroachment isn't one of the evils that tend spontaneously to disappear, but on the contrary is one of the evils that tend to grow more and more formidable. Mankind have some disposition, whether as rulers or as fellow-citizens, to impose their own opinions and inclinations as a rule of conduct on others; this disposition is so energetically supported by some of the best and by some of the worst feelings in human nature that it is hardly ever kept under restraint by anything except lack of power; and the power .of societies. is not declining but growing; so unless a strong barrier of *moral conviction* can be raised against the mischief .of unwarranted interference with individual liberty., we must expect—given the way the world is—to see it increase.

It will be convenient for the argument, if instead of plunging immediately into the general thesis we confine ourselves at first to a single branch of it—a branch on which the .general. principle here stated is to some extent recognized by current opinions. This one branch is *the liberty of thought*, from which it is impossible to separate the related

liberty of speaking and of writing. These liberties form a considerable part of the political morality of all countries that profess religious toleration and free institutions, but the philosophical and practical grounds on which they rest are perhaps not as familiar to people in general, or as thoroughly grasped even by many of the leaders of opinion, as might have been expected. Those grounds, when rightly

understood, also apply to other divisions of our subject, and a thorough consideration of *this* part of the question will be found to be the best introduction to *the remainder*. So I hope you'll forgive me if nothing that I am about to say is new to you, as I embark on yet one more discussion of something that has often been discussed over the past three centuries.

Chapter 2: Liberty of thought and discussion

It is to be hoped that there is no longer any need to defend the 'liberty of the press' as one of the protections against corrupt or tyrannical government. No argument, we may suppose, can now be needed for this:

No legislature or executive whose interests aren't exactly the same as the people's should be allowed •to tell them what to believe or •to decide what doctrines or arguments they shall be allowed to hear.

This aspect of the 'liberty' issue has been so often and so triumphantly enforced by previous writers that there is no need for me to make a special point of it here. Though the law of England regarding the press is as servile today as it was three hundred years ago, there is little danger of its being actually enforced against political discussion, except during some temporary panic when fear of revolt drives ministers and judges from their proper course.¹ Generally speaking, it

¹ These words had hardly been written when the Government's *Press Prosecutions* of 1858 took place—as though intended to emphatically contradict me. Still, that ill-judged interference with the liberty of public discussion hasn't induced me to alter a single word in the text, nor has it at all weakened my conviction that except in moments of panic the era of pains and penalties for political discussion has in our own country passed away. For one thing, the prosecutions were not persisted in; for another, they were never strictly speaking *political* prosecutions. The offence charged was not that of •criticizing institutions or rulers or their acts, but rather of •circulating what was deemed an immoral doctrine, namely the lawfulness of tyrannicide.

If the arguments of my present chapter have any validity, there ought to exist the fullest liberty of proclaiming and discussing—as a matter of ethical conviction—any doctrine, however immoral it may be considered. So it isn't relevant here to consider whether the doctrine of tyrannicide *is* immoral. I shall content myself with •making three points•. (1) This subject has always been one of the open questions of morals. (2) When a private citizen strikes down a criminal who has raised himself above the law and thus placed himself beyond the reach of legal punishment or control, this has been regarded by whole nations and by some of the best and wisest of men not as a crime but as an act of exalted virtue. (3) Such an act, whether it be right or wrong, is not of the nature of •assassination but rather of •civil war. In a particular case, it may be proper to punish someone for inciting others else to it, but only if an overt act has followed, and at least a probable connection can be established between the act and the incitement. Even then the only government entitled to punish such attacks is the one that has been attacked.

isn't likely that the government in a constitutional country, whether or not it is completely answerable to the people, will often try to control the expression of opinion—*except when by doing so it expresses the general intolerance of the public*. Let us suppose, therefore, that the government is entirely in harmony with the people, and never thinks of coercing anyone except in ways that it thinks the people want. But I deny the right of the people to exercise such coercion, whether directly or through their government. The power of coercion itself is illegitimate. The best government has no more right to it than the worst. It is *at least* as noxious when exerted in accordance with public opinion as when it is exerted in opposition to it. If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and that one had the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he would be in silencing them if he could. You might think that silencing *only one* couldn't be so *very* wrong, but that is mistaken, and here is why. If an opinion were a personal possession of no value except to the person who has it, so that being obstructed in the enjoyment of it was simply a private injury, it *would* make some difference whether the harm was inflicted on only a few persons or on many. But the special wrongness of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing

- not one individual, but the human race,
- posterity as well as the present generation,
- those who dissent from the opinion as well as those who hold it.

Indeed, those who dissent are wronged *more* than those who agree. If the opinion in question is right, they are robbed of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; and if it is wrong, they lose a benefit that is almost as great, namely the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth that would come from its collision with error.

We need to consider these two cases separately; each has a distinct branch of the argument corresponding to it. We can never be sure that the opinion we are trying to suppress is false; and even if we were sure of its falsity it would still be wrong to suppress it. [The first branch is dealt with right away; discussion of the second starts on page 22.]

First: the opinion the authorities are trying to suppress may be true. Those who want to suppress it will deny its truth, of course; but they aren't infallible. They have no authority to decide the question for all mankind, and exclude every other person from the means of judging. To refuse a hearing to an opinion because they are sure that it is false is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty—i.e. that *their being sure* that P is the same as *its being certainly true* that P. All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility, which is a good argument for condemning it; many people have used this argument, but it's none the worse for that.

Unfortunately for the good sense of mankind, the fact that people are fallible doesn't carry nearly as much weight in practice as it is allowed to carry in theory. Everyone knows perfectly well that he is fallible, but few think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility, or allow that the errors to which they admit they are liable might include some opinion of which they feel very certain. Absolute monarchs, or others accustomed to unlimited deference, usually feel this complete confidence in their own opinions on nearly all subjects. People who lack the disadvantages of monarchs and thus sometimes hear their opinions disputed, and have some experience of being set right when they are wrong, have the same unbounded confidence only in such of their opinions as are shared by all around them, or by those to whom they habitually defer. For the less confidence someone has in his own individual

judgment, the more he relies, with complete trust, on the infallibility of 'the world' in general. And •the world, to each individual, means •the part of it that he comes into contact with: his party, his sect, his church, his class of society. By comparison with most people, a man may be called almost *liberal* and *large-minded* if to him 'the world' on which he bases his most confident opinions is anything as comprehensive as his own country or the times in which he lives. The faith he has in this collective authority isn't at all shaken by his being aware that other ages, countries, sects, churches, classes, and parties have thought—and even now think—the exact reverse of what he does. He bestows on his own 'world' the responsibility for being in the right against the dissentient 'worlds' of other people. It doesn't bother him that mere accident has decided which of these numerous 'worlds' is the one he relies on: that the causes that make him an Anglican in London would have made him a Buddhist or a Confucian in Peking. Yet it is as evident in itself as any amount of argument can make it that *ages* are no more infallible than *individuals*, because every age has held many opinions that subsequent ages deemed to be not only false but absurd; and it is as certain that many opinions •now generally accepted •will be rejected by future ages as it is that many that •have been generally accepted are •now rejected.

An objection that is likely to be made to this argument runs somewhat as follows:

There is no greater assumption of infallibility in forbidding the propagation of error than there is in anything else done by public authority on its own judgment and responsibility. *Judgment* is given to men to be used. Because it may be used erroneously, are men to be told that they oughtn't to use it at all? To prohibit something they think to be pernicious is not •to claim exemption from error, but •to perform their duty to

act, fallible though they are, on their conscientious convictions. If we were never to act on our opinions because they may be wrong, we would leave all our interests uncared for and all our duties unperformed. An objection that applies to *all* conduct can't be a valid objection to any conduct in particular.

Governments and individuals have a duty to form the truest opinions they can; to form them carefully, and never impose them on others unless they are quite sure of being right. But when they are sure, it is not *conscientiousness* but *cowardice* to shrink from acting on their opinions, and to allow doctrines that they honestly think dangerous to the welfare of mankind—either in this life or in another—to be scattered abroad without restraint, just because other people in less enlightened times have persecuted opinions that are now believed to be true! Let us take care not to make the same mistake; but governments and nations have made mistakes in other things that are not denied to be fit subjects for the exercise of authority, such as imposing bad taxes and making unjust wars. Ought we therefore to impose no taxes, and whatever the provocation to make no wars? Men and governments must act to the best of their ability. There's no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life. We may—we *must*—assume our opinion to be true for the guidance of our own conduct; and that's all we are assuming when we forbid bad men to pervert society by spreading opinions that we regard as false and pernicious.

I answer: No, it is assuming very much more than that. There is the greatest difference between •presuming an opinion to be true because, with every opportunity for

contesting it, it hasn't been refuted, and •assuming its truth as a basis for not permitting its refutation. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition that justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a human being have any rational assurance of being right.

Look at the history of •what people have believed; or look at the ordinary •conduct of human life. Why are each of these no worse than they are? It is certainly not because of the inherent force of the human understanding! Take any proposition that isn't self-evident: for every person who is capable of judging it, there are ninety-nine others who aren't; and the 'capability' of that one person is only comparative; for the majority of the eminent men of every past generation held many opinions now known to be erroneous, and did or approved many things that no-one would now defend. Well, then, why is it that there is on the whole a preponderance among mankind of •rational opinions and •rational conduct? If there really is this preponderance—and there must be, unless human affairs are and always were in an almost desperate state—it is owing to the fact that *the errors of the human mind can be corrected*. This quality of the human mind is the source of everything worthy of respect in man, whether as a thinking or as a moral being. He is capable of correcting his mistakes by discussion and experience. Not by experience alone: there must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually give way to fact and argument; but facts and arguments can't have any effect on the mind unless they are brought before it. Very few facts are able to tell their own story, without comments to bring out their meaning. So: because the whole strength and value of human judgment depends on a single property, namely that it can be set right when it is wrong, it can be relied on only when the means

of setting it right are kept constantly at hand. Consider someone whose judgment really is deserving of confidence—how has it become so? Through his conducting himself as follows:

- He has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct.
- He has made it his practice to listen to all that could be said against him, to profit by as much of it as was sound, and expound to himself—and sometimes to others—the fallacy of what was fallacious.
- He has felt that the only way for a human to approach knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all the ways in which it can be looked at by every kind of mind.

No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any way but this; and the human intellect isn't built to become wise in any other manner. The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by comparing it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in acting on the opinion, is the only stable foundation for a sound reliance on it. Knowing everything that can, at least obviously, be said against him, and having taken up his position against those who disagree, knowing that he has looked for objections and difficulties instead of avoiding them, and has shut out no light that can be thrown on the subject from any direction—he has a right to think his judgment better than that of any person or crowd of them that hasn't gone through a similar process.

It is not too much to require that what the wisest of mankind, those who are best entitled to trust their own judgment, find necessary to warrant their relying on it, should be submitted to by that miscellaneous collection of a few wise and many foolish individuals called 'the public'.

[That sentence is exactly as Mill wrote it.] The most intolerant of churches, the Roman Catholic church, even at the canonization of a saint, admits and patiently listens to a ‘devil’s advocate’. The holiest of men, it seems, can’t be admitted to posthumous honours until all that the devil could say against him is known and weighed. Even Newton’s physics—if we weren’t permitted to question it, mankind couldn’t feel as completely sure of its truth as they now do. The beliefs that we have most justification for have as their only safeguard a standing invitation to the whole world to ·try to· prove them unfounded. If that challenge isn’t accepted, or is accepted and the attempt fails, we are still far from certainty; but we have done the best that the existing state of human reason admits of; we have neglected nothing that could give the truth a chance of reaching us. If the challenge continues to stand, we can hope that if there is a better truth it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the meantime we may rely on having attained as close an approach to truth as is possible in our own day. That is how much certainty a fallible being can get, and that is the only way to get it.

It’s strange that men should admit the validity of the arguments for free discussion, but object to their being ‘pushed to an extreme’, not seeing that unless the reasons are good for an extreme case they aren’t good for any case. Strange that they should imagine that they aren’t assuming infallibility when they acknowledge •that there should be free discussion on all subjects that can possibly be doubtful, but think •that some particular principle or doctrine—this being the ‘extreme’ case—ought not to be questioned because it is so certain (meaning that *it* is certain because *they* are certain!). If we call any proposition *certain* while there is anyone who would deny its certainty if permitted (but who isn’t permitted), we’re assuming that we and those who agree

with us are the judges of certainty—judges who don’t hear the other side.

In the present age—which has been described as ‘destitute of faith, but terrified of scepticism’—people feel sure not so much that •their opinions are true as that •they wouldn’t know what to do without them. So the claims of an opinion to be protected from public attack are based less on its truth than on its importance to society. This is alleged:

Some beliefs are so useful, indeed indispensable, to our well-being that governments have as much of a duty to uphold them as to protect any other of the interests of society. With that kind of necessity, on matters that are directly in the government’s line of duty, something less than infallibility may permit and even oblige governments to act on their own opinion, confirmed by the general opinion of mankind.

Something else that is also often argued, and still oftener thought, is this:

Only bad men would want to weaken these beneficial beliefs; and there can’t be anything wrong in restraining bad men, and in prohibiting something that only bad men would want to do.

This way of thinking tries to justify restraints on discussion not through the •truth of doctrines but through their •usefulness; and it hopes in that way to avoid having to claim to be an infallible judge of opinions. But those who are content with this don’t see that they have merely shifted the assumption of infallibility from one point to another. The usefulness of an opinion is itself a matter of opinion, and is as disputable—as open to discussion and as much in need of it—as is the opinion itself. Deciding that an opinion is dangerous, just like deciding that it is false, requires an infallible judge of opinions unless the condemned opinion has a full opportunity to defend itself. ‘Well, the heretic

may be allowed to maintain that his opinion is useful, or harmless, though he is forbidden to maintain its truth.' That won't do, because the truth of an opinion is part of its usefulness. If we want to know whether it is desirable that a proposition be believed, can we possibly exclude the question of whether it is true? No belief that is contrary to truth can be really useful: this is the opinion not of bad men but of the best men. When a good man is accused of denying some doctrine that he is told is useful but which he believes is false, can he be prevented from urging that false doctrines can never be useful? Those who are on the side of publicly accepted opinions never fail to take advantage of this plea; you don't find *them* handling the question of utility as if it could be completely sifted out from the question of truth; on the contrary, they hold that the doctrine ·they are protecting· is indispensable precisely *because* it is 'the truth'. There can be no fair discussion of usefulness if such a vital argument can be employed on one side of the debate but not on the other. And in practice when law or public feeling doesn't permit the •truth of an opinion to be disputed, it is just as intolerant of a denial of its •usefulness. . . .

In order to illustrate more fully the badness of denying a hearing to opinions because *we* have condemned them, I should tie the discussion to a concrete case; and I freely choose the cases that are least favourable to me—ones where the argument against freedom of opinion, both on the score of truth and on that of utility, is considered the strongest. Let the opinions in question be •the belief in a God and in life after death, or •any of the commonly accepted doctrines of morality. Fighting the battle on *that* ground gives a great advantage to an unfair opponent, who will be sure to say:

Are *these* the doctrines that you regard as not certain enough to deserve be taken under the protection of law? Is *the belief in a God* one of the opinions

that (according to you) one can't feel sure of without assuming that one is infallible?

(Indeed, many who have no desire to be unfair will say this internally.) Allow me to point out that what I call an 'assumption of infallibility' is not •feeling sure of a doctrine but rather •undertaking to decide that question for others, without letting them hear what can be said on the contrary side. And I denounce and deplore this claim just as much if it is put forth on the side of my own most solemn convictions. However sure someone is not only of the •falsity of an opinion but also of its •pernicious consequences, and even (to adopt expressions that I altogether condemn) of its •immorality and impiety, if that private judgment leads him to prevent the opinion from being heard to defend itself he *assumes infallibility*—even if his judgment is backed by the public judgment of his country or his contemporaries. And so far from •the assumption ·of infallibility· being less objectionable or less dangerous because the opinion is called immoral or impious, it is precisely with *those* opinions that the assumption is most fatal. It is on exactly those matters that the men of one generation commit the dreadful mistakes that arouse astonishment and horror in later generations. It is among them that we find the memorable historical instances where the arm of the law has been employed to root out the •best men and the •noblest doctrines; with deplorable success as regards the •men, though some of the •doctrines survived and (ironically) were later invoked in defence of similar conduct towards those who dissented from *them* or from their accepted interpretation.

Mankind can hardly be too often reminded that there was once a man named Socrates who came into a memorable collision with the legal authorities and public opinion of his time ·and place·. Born in an age and country abounding in individual greatness, this man has been reported to us. by

those who best knew both him and his times, as the most virtuous man then alive. And we know him as the head and exemplary model for all subsequent teachers of virtue, the source of the lofty inspiration of Plato and of the judicious utilitarianism of Aristotle ('the master of those who know', as Dante called him), the two sources of ethical and of all other philosophy. This acknowledged master of all the eminent thinkers who have since lived—a man whose fame, still growing after more than two thousand years, nearly outweighs all the other names that make his native city illustrious—was judicially convicted and put to death by his countrymen for impiety and immorality. Impiety in denying the gods recognized by the state (indeed his accuser said that Socrates didn't believe in any gods). Immorality in being, through his doctrines and instructions, a 'corrupter of youth'. We have every ground for believing that the tribunal honestly found him guilty, and condemned to death as a criminal the man who was probably the best man who had ever lived up to that time.

After the condemnation of Socrates, mention of most other instances of 'justice' gone wrong would be an anticlimax, the one exception being the event that took place on Calvary rather more than eighteen hundred years ago. The man who left on the memory of those who witnessed his life and conversation such an impression of his moral grandeur that eighteen subsequent centuries have done homage to him as God in person was ignominiously put to death... as what? As a blasphemer! Men didn't merely mistake their benefactor; they mistook him for the exact opposite of what he was, treating him as that monster of impiety that they are now held to be because of how they treated him. The feelings that mankind now have regarding these lamentable dealings with Socrates and with Jesus, especially the latter of the two, make them extremely unjust

in their judgment of those who put the two to death. These seem not to have been bad men—not worse than men most commonly are, but rather the contrary; men who possessed a full or perhaps over-full measure of the religious, moral, and patriotic feelings of their time and people; just the kind of men who at any time—ours included—have every chance of passing through life blameless and respected. [In the background of the next bit is this from *Matthew* 26: 64-5: 'Jesus said... "Hereafter shall ye see the son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes, saying: "He hath spoken blasphemy; what further need have we of witnesses?"'.] The high-priest who tore his garments when he heard the words that according to all the ideas of his country constituted the blackest guilt was probably quite as sincere in his horror and indignation as are the general run of respectable and pious men now in the religious and moral sentiments they proclaim; and most of those who now shudder at the high-priest's conduct, if they had lived in his time and been born Jews, would have acted precisely as he did. Orthodox Christians who are tempted to think that those who stoned to death the first martyrs must have been worse men than they themselves are ought to remember that one of those persecutors was St. Paul.

Let me add one more example, the most striking of all, if the impressiveness of an error is measured by the wisdom and virtue of the person who falls into it! If anyone in a position of power ever had grounds for thinking himself the best and most enlightened among his contemporaries it was the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Absolute monarch of the whole civilized world, he preserved through life not only the most untainted justice but also—less to be expected from his Stoic upbringing—the tenderest heart. The few failings that are attributed to him were all on the side of leniency; and his writings, the highest ethical product of the

ancient mind, differ little if at all from the most characteristic teachings of Christ. This man, a better Christian than almost any of the ostensibly Christian sovereigns who have since reigned, persecuted Christianity. (In calling Marcus Aurelius 'Christian', I mean that in every sense of the word except the one having to do with the acceptance of dogmas.) Placed at the summit of all the previous attainments of humanity, with an open and free intellect and a character that led him to embody in his moral writings the Christian ideal, he nevertheless failed to see that Christianity was going to be a good and not an evil to the world. . . . He knew that existing society was in a deplorable state. But such as it was, he saw or thought he saw that it was held together and prevented from being worse by belief in and reverence for the accepted gods. As a ruler of mankind, with a deep sense of his duty to the world, he thought it his duty not to allow society to fall to pieces; and he didn't see how, if its existing ties were removed, any others could be formed to pull it back together. The new religion openly aimed at dissolving the existing ties; so it seemed to him that either it was his duty to adopt that religion or it was his duty to suppress it. Well, then, •the theology of Christianity didn't appear to him true or of divine origin, •this strange history of a crucified God was not credible to him, and •a system that purported to be based on something he found so wholly unbelievable couldn't be foreseen to be an agency for renewal (which is what it has turned out to be, on balance). For these reasons this gentlest and most lovable of philosophers and rulers, acting on a solemn sense of duty, authorized the persecution of Christianity. To my mind this is one of the most tragic facts in all history. It is bitter to think of how different the Christianity of the world might have been if the Christian faith had been adopted as the religion of the •Roman• empire under the auspices of Marcus Aurelius

instead of those of Constantine. But in fairness to him and to the truth it must be admitted that any plea that can be urged for punishing anti-Christian teaching •today• was available to Marcus Aurelius for punishing the propagation of Christianity. No Christian more firmly believes that atheism is false and tends to the dissolution of society than Marcus Aurelius believed the same things of Christianity—he who might have been thought more capable of appreciating it than anyone else then alive. To anyone who approves of punishment for spreading opinions, I say:

Unless you flatter yourself that you are a wiser and better man than Marcus Aurelius , more deeply informed about the wisdom of your time and more elevated in your intellect above it, more earnest in your search for truth, or more single-minded in your devotion to it when you find it—you should abstain from that assumption of the joint infallibility of yourself and the multitude which the great Antoninus [= Marcus Aurelius] made with such unfortunate results.

Some of the enemies of religious freedom are aware that they can't defend the use of punishment for restraining irreligious opinions by any argument that won't also justify Marcus Antoninus; and when they are hard pressed they accept this consequence and say, with Dr. Johnson, that the persecutors of Christianity were in the right. They say that persecution is an ordeal through which truth ought to pass, and always passes successfully, legal penalties being ultimately •powerless against truth but sometimes beneficially •effective against mischievous errors. This form of the argument for religious intolerance is remarkable enough to deserve scrutiny.

A theory that maintains that truth may justifiably be persecuted because persecution can't possibly do it any harm cannot be accused of deliberate hostility to the reception of

•new truths; but we can't congratulate it on the generosity of its treatment of the •persons through whom such truths have been brought to mankind! To reveal to the world something that deeply concerns it and that it didn't previously know, to show the world that it had been mistaken on some vital point of worldly or spiritual concern, is as important a service as a human being can render to his fellow-creatures; and in certain cases, such as in those of the early Christians and of the leaders of the Reformation, Dr. Johnson and his fellow-believers think it to have been the most precious gift that could be bestowed on mankind. That the authors of such splendid benefits should be repaid by martyrdom, that they should be 'rewarded' by being treated as the vilest of criminals, is not on this theory a deplorable error and misfortune for which humanity should mourn in sackcloth and ashes, but rather is the normal and justifiable state of things. According to this doctrine, the propounder of a new truth should stand (like the proposer of a new law in the legislature of ancient Locris) with a halter around his neck, to be instantly tightened if the public assembly, after hearing his reasons, doesn't immediately adopt his proposition. People who defend this way of treating benefactors evidently don't set much value on the benefit! I think that this view of the subject is mostly confined to the sort of persons who think that new truths may have been desirable once but that we have had enough of them now!

Anyway, the dictum that truth always triumphs over persecution is one of those pleasant falsehoods that men repeat after one another until they become 'common knowledge', but which all experience refutes. History teems with instances of truth put down by persecution. Even if not suppressed forever, it can be thrown back for centuries. To speak only of religious opinions: the Reformation broke out at least twenty times before Luther, and was put down. [Mill names

seven reformist individuals or groups before Luther, all 'put down'.] Even after the era of Luther, wherever persecution was persisted in it was successful. In Spain, Italy, Flanders, the Austrian empire, protestantism was rooted out; and it would probably have been rooted out in England too if Queen Mary had lived longer or Queen Elizabeth had died sooner. Persecution has always succeeded except where the heretics were too strong a party to be effectively persecuted. No reasonable person can doubt that Christianity could have been wiped out in the Roman empire. It spread and became predominant because the persecutions were intermittent, lasting for only a short time and separated by long intervals of almost undisturbed Christian propagandizing. It is a piece of idle sentimentality that truth as such has an inherent power, lacked by error, of prevailing against the dungeon and the stake. Men are not more zealous for truth than they often are for error, and a sufficient application of legal or even of social penalties will generally succeed in stopping the propagation of either. The real advantage that truth has is just this: when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once or many times, but through the centuries there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its reappearances comes at a time when circumstances are favourable to its escaping persecution until it has made enough headway to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it.

This will be said: 'We don't now put to death the introducers of new opinions; we aren't like our ancestors who slew the prophets; we even build monuments to them.' It is true that we no longer put heretics to death; and even against the most obnoxious opinions modern feeling probably wouldn't tolerate punishments severe enough to wipe them out. But let us not flatter ourselves that we are now free from the stain even of legal persecution. Penalties for opinions, or

at least for expressing them, still exist by law; and even today their enforcement is not so rare as to make it at all incredible that they may some day be revived in full force. In the year 1857—only two years before this Essay was first published—an unfortunate man was sentenced to twenty-one months imprisonment for uttering and writing on a gate some offensive words concerning Christianity. (This happened at the summer assizes of the county of Cornwall. The man is said to be of unexceptionable conduct in every aspect of life.) [Mill gives the name and date for this and each of the other three cases he next mentions.] Less than a month later, at the Old Bailey, two people on two separate occasions were rejected as jurymen, and one of them was grossly insulted by the judge and by one of the lawyers, because they honestly declared that they had no theological beliefs. A third person, a foreigner, was for the same reason denied justice against a thief. This refusal of remedy was based on the legal doctrine that a person cannot be allowed to give evidence in a court of justice if he doesn't proclaim a belief in a god (any god will do) and in a life after death. This doctrine is equivalent to declaring such a person to be an outlaw, someone excluded from the protection of the courts; it implies not only that •he may be robbed or assaulted with impunity if no-one but himself or people who think as he does are present, but also that •anyone else may be robbed or assaulted with impunity if the proof of the crime depends on his evidence. The underlying assumption here is that someone's oath is worthless if he doesn't believe in a life after death. Someone who believes this must be very ignorant of history, since it is historically true that a large proportion of unbelievers in all ages have been people of distinguished integrity and honour. This proposition wouldn't be maintained by anyone who had the slightest conception how many of those persons who stand in greatest repute with the world, both for virtues and

for attainments, are well known (at least to their intimates) to be unbelievers. Furthermore, the rule is suicidal! It cuts away its own foundation: on the claim that atheists must be liars, it accepts the testimony of all •atheists who are willing to lie, and rejects only •those who brave the disgrace of publicly owning to a detested creed rather than affirming a falsehood. A rule thus self-convicted of absurdity so far as regards its professed purpose can be kept in force only as a badge of hatred, a relic of persecution. And it is a very strange persecution, because what qualifies one for undergoing it is clearly proving that one doesn't deserve it! The rule and the theory behind it are almost as insulting to believers as to unbelievers. For if he who doesn't believe in a future state necessarily lies, it follows that those who *do* believe are prevented from lying—if indeed they *are*—only by the fear of hell. . . .

These, indeed, are merely rags and remnants of persecution, and may be thought to be not so much •an indication of the wish to persecute as •an example of that very frequent infirmity of English minds, which makes them take a preposterous pleasure in the assertion of a bad principle when *they* are no longer bad enough to want to carry it really into practice. But unfortunately the state of the public mind doesn't give us a guarantee that the suspension of worse forms of legal persecution, which has lasted for about one generation, will continue. At this time the quiet surface of routine is ruffled as often by attempts to revive past evils as it is by attempts to introduce new benefits. What is boasted of at the present time as the •revival of religion is always, in narrow and undeveloped minds, at least as much the •revival of bigotry; and where there is the strongest permanent leaven of intolerance in the feelings of a people—as there always is in the middle classes of this country—it doesn't take much to provoke them into actively persecuting those whom they have

never ceased to regard as proper objects of persecution.²

For it is this—it is men's opinions and feelings concerning those who disown the beliefs they deem important—that stops this country from being a place of freedom of thought. For a long time past, the chief harm done by legal penalties has been merely to strengthen the social stigma. It is the *social* stigma that is really effective. It is so effective that in England people are less likely to profess opinions that are under the ban of society than are people in other countries to profess opinions that involve a risk of judicial punishment. For those who aren't wealthy enough to do without the good will of other people, social pressures are as effective as law in suppressing unpopular opinions; being imprisoned is no worse than being excluded from the means of earning a living. Those who have a secure income—enough to live on—and who don't want any favours from men in power, or from bodies of men, or from the public, have nothing to fear from openly declaring their opinions except being ill thought of and ill spoken of—and they don't have to be very heroic to be able to bear that! There is no room for any appeal for pity on behalf of such people. But though we don't now inflict as much harm as we used to on those who

think differently from us, it may be that we do *ourselves* as much harm as ever by our treatment of them. Socrates was put to death, but the Socratic philosophy rose like the sun in the skies and spread its illumination over the whole intellectual firmament. Christians were thrown to the lions, but the Christian Church grew up as a stately and spreading tree, towering over the older and less vigorous growths and stifling them by its shade. Our merely *social* intolerance doesn't kill anyone, and doesn't root out any opinions; but it does induce men to disguise their opinions or to abstain from actively trying to spread them. With us, heretical opinions don't noticeably gain or lose ground in each decade or generation; they never blaze out far and wide, but continue to smoulder in the narrow circles of thoughtful and studious people among whom they originate, without ever spreading any light—whether true or deceptive—on the general affairs of mankind. This maintains a state of affairs that is very satisfactory to some minds, because it keeps all prevailing opinions outwardly undisturbed, without the unpleasant process of fining or imprisoning anybody, and without absolutely forbidding the exercise of reason by dissentients who are afflicted with the malady of thought!

² Ample warning can be drawn from the way in which, on the occasion of the Sepoy insurrection in India, the general display of the worst parts of our national character included a large infusion of the passions of a persecutor. The ravings of fanatics or charlatans from the pulpit may be unworthy of notice; but the heads of the Evangelical party have announced as their principle for the government of Hindus and Moslems that only schools in which the bible is taught should be supported by public money, implying that public employment should be given only to real or pretended Christians. An Under-Secretary of State, in a speech delivered to his constituents. . . . in 1857, is reported to have said:

The British Government's toleration of the Indians' faith, the superstition that they called 'religion', has had the effect of holding back the ascendancy of the British name, and preventing the salutary growth of Christianity. . . . Toleration is the great corner-stone of the religious liberties of this country; but don't let them abuse that precious word toleration. As I understand it, it means the complete liberty to all, freedom of worship, among *Christians who worship on the same foundation*. It means toleration of all sects and denominations of *Christians who believe in the one mediation*, that is, in the mediating role of Jesus Christ.

The 'superstition' in question is the faith of a hundred million British subjects! I want to call attention to the fact that a man who has been deemed fit to fill a high office in the government of this country. . . . maintains that those who don't believe in the divinity of Christ are all beyond the pale of toleration. Who, after this imbecilic display, can go on thinking that religious persecution has passed away, never to return?

This is a convenient plan for having peace in the intellectual world, and keeping things ticking along in very much the way they do already. But the price paid for this sort of intellectual pacification is *the sacrifice of the entire moral courage of the human mind*. A state of affairs in which

a large portion of the most active and inquiring intellects find it advisable to keep to themselves the genuine principles and grounds of their convictions, and try in their public statements to fit as much as they can of their own conclusions to premises that they have silently rejected,

can't send forth people with the open fearless characters and logical consistent intellects that once adorned the thinking world. The sort of men it can be expected to produce are either mere conformers to commonplace ideas or time-servers [roughly = 'crowd-pleasers'] for truth whose arguments on all great subjects are meant for their hearers and are not the arguments that convinced *them*. Those who avoid both of these roles do so by narrowing their thoughts and interests •to things that can be spoken of without getting into the territory of *principles*—i.e. •to small practical matters that would come right by themselves if only the minds of mankind were strengthened and enlarged, and won't ever be made really right until that happens. ·The irony of this is that· in behaving like that they abandon the very thing that *would* strengthen and enlarge men's minds, namely free and daring intellectual inquiry into the highest subjects.

If you regard this reticence on the part of heretics as no bad thing, consider this:

A consequence of their reticence is that there is never any fair and thorough discussion of heretical opinions; and ones that couldn't survive such a discussion, though they may be prevented from spreading, don't disappear.

But the worst harm done by banning all inquiry that doesn't end in orthodox conclusions is not •to the minds of heretics but •to those who aren't heretics, and whose whole mental development is cramped, and their reason intimidated, by the fear of ·coming to accept what turns out to be· heresy. Who can calculate what the world loses in the multitude of promising intellects combined with timid characters—people who don't dare to follow out any bold, vigorous, independent train of thought for fear that it will land them in something that might be thought irreligious or immoral? Among them we may occasionally see some man of deep conscientiousness, and subtle and refined understanding, who spends his life fine-tuning his faith with an intellect that he can't silence, exhausting the resources of ingenuity in an attempt to reconcile the promptings of •his conscience and reason with •orthodoxy, perhaps never succeeding in doing so. No-one can be a great thinker if he doesn't recognize that his first duty as a thinker is to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead to. Someone who with due study and preparation thinks for himself does more to advance the truth, *even in his errors*, than is done by the *true* opinions of those who hold them only because they don't allow themselves to think. Not that it is primarily—let alone solely—•to form great thinkers that freedom of thought is required. On the contrary, it is even more indispensable for enabling average human beings to reach the highest mental level they are capable of. There have been, and may again be, great •individual thinkers in a general atmosphere of mental slavery. But there never was and never will be, in that atmosphere, an intellectually active •people. Where any people—the populace of any country—has temporarily moved towards being intellectually active, that has been because the fear of unorthodox theorizing was temporarily suspended. Where ·on the other hand· there is a silent

understanding that principles aren't to be disputed—where the discussion of the greatest questions that can occupy humanity is considered to be *closed*—we can't hope to find the generally high level of mental activity that has made some periods of history so remarkable. Whenever the big subjects—the ones large and important enough to kindle enthusiasm—were protected from controversy, the mind of the populace wasn't stirred up from its foundations, with even persons of the most ordinary intellect being pushed into something of the dignity of thinking beings. We had an example of such a push in the condition of Europe in the period immediately following the Reformation; another, though limited to continental Europe and to a more cultivated class, in the theorizing movement of the second half of the eighteenth century; and a third, of still briefer duration, in the intellectual fermentation of Germany during the period influenced by Goethe and Fichte. These periods differed widely in what particular opinions they developed; but they had this in common: during all three the yoke of authority was broken. In each period, an old mental despotism had been thrown off and no new one had yet taken its place. The push given at these three periods has made Europe what it now is. Every single improvement that has taken place in the human mind or in human institutions can be clearly traced back to one or other of them. For some time now it has seemed that all three of those pushes are just about exhausted; and we can't expect a fresh start until we again assert our mental freedom.

Let us now pass to the second branch of the argument [this refers to the dichotomy mentioned on page 11.] Dismissing the thought of falsehood in the publicly accepted opinions, let us assume them to be true; and on that basis let us look into the value of *how* they are likely to be held, given that their truth is not freely and openly discussed, pro and con.

However unwilling a person who has a strong opinion may be to admit that his opinion *might* be false, he ought to be moved by this thought: however true it may be, if it isn't fully, frequently and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma rather than as a living truth.

There are people (fortunately not quite as many as there used to be) who will be satisfied if you assent undoubtingly to something that they think is true, even if you have no knowledge whatever of the grounds for the belief in question and couldn't defend it decently against the most superficial objections. When such people get their creed to be taught as authoritative, they naturally think that no good and some harm will come from allowing it to be questioned. Where their influence is dominant, they make it nearly impossible for the publicly accepted opinion to be rejected wisely and considerately. It may still be rejected rashly and ignorantly; for it is seldom possible to shut off discussion *entirely*, and once discussion gets started, beliefs that are held as creeds rather than being based on reasons are apt to give way before the slightest semblance of an argument. Set aside that possibility, and take the case where the true opinion remains in the person's mind, but sits there as a prejudice, a belief that owes nothing to argument and isn't vulnerable to argument—this isn't the way truth ought to be held by a rational being! This is not *knowing the truth*. Truth when accepted in that way is merely one more superstition, accidentally clinging to words that enunciate a genuine truth.

Protestants at least don't deny that the intellect and judgment of mankind ought to be cultivated [= 'helped to grow and flourish']. If this is to be done, what more appropriate method is there than for the person to employ his intellect and judgment on the things that concern him so much that it is considered necessary for him to hold opinions on them?

If the cultivation of the understanding consists in one thing more than in another, it is surely in learning the grounds of one's own opinions. When people believe something on a topic on which it is highly important to believe rightly, they ought to be able to defend it at least against the common objections. This may be said:

Let them be *taught* what the grounds are for their opinions. Just because they never hear the opinions being disputed it doesn't follow that they are merely parroting them. Persons who learn geometry don't simply commit the theorems to memory, but understand and remember the demonstrations; and it would be absurd to say that they remain ignorant of the grounds of geometrical truths because they never hear anyone deny them and try to disprove them.

Undoubtedly; and such teaching suffices in a subject like mathematics, where there is nothing at all to be said on the wrong side of the question. That's what is special about the evidentness of mathematical truths: all the argument is on one side. There are no objections, and no answers to objections. But on every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons. Even in natural science there is always some other explanation possible of the same facts; some theory with the earth at the centre instead of the sun, some theory explaining combustion in terms of phlogiston rather than of oxygen; and it has to be shown why that other theory can't be the true one. Until this is shown and we know *how* it is shown, we don't understand the grounds for accepting the theory that we do accept. But when we turn to infinitely more complicated subjects—to morals, religion, politics, social relations, and the business of life—three quarters of the arguments for every controversial opinion consist in dispelling the appearances that favour

some opinion different from it. The second-greatest of the ancient orators has left it on record that he always studied his adversary's case as intensely as he did his own, if not even more so. What Cicero (the orator in question) practised as the means of success in the law courts should be imitated by anyone who studies any subject in order to arrive at the truth. He who knows only his own side of the case doesn't know much about *it*. His reasons may be good, and no-one may have been able to refute them; but if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, and doesn't even know what they *are*, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. The rational position for him would be to suspend judgment, and if he doesn't settle for that, he is either being led by authority or doing what most people do, which is to adopt the side to which he feels most strongly drawn. It isn't enough that he should hear the arguments of opponents from his own teachers, presented in *their* way and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. That isn't the way to do justice to the opposing arguments, or to bring them into real contact with his own mind. He must be able to hear them from people who actually believe them, defend them in earnest, and do their very best for them. If he doesn't know them in their most plausible and persuasive form, and doesn't feel the whole force of the difficulty that the true view of the subject—*his* view—has to encounter and dispose of, he will never really possess the portion of truth that meets and removes that difficulty. Ninety-nine per cent of what are called 'educated' men are in this condition, even of those who can argue fluently for their opinions. Perhaps their conclusion is true, but it might be false for all they know to the contrary. They haven't put themselves in the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such opponents may have to say; and consequently they don't in any proper

sense of the word *know* the doctrine that they themselves proclaim. They don't know the parts of it that explain and justify the rest. They don't know the considerations showing that an apparent theoretical conflict can be reconciled, or that of two apparently strong reasons one and not the other ought to be preferred. They are strangers to all •that part of the truth that tips the balance and decides how a completely informed mind should judge; and •that won't ever be really known except by those who have attended equally and impartially to both sides, and tried to see the reasons for both in the strongest light. This discipline is *essential* to a real understanding of moral and human subjects—so much so that if any important truth doesn't *have* any opponents we must *imagine* them and supply them with the strongest arguments that the most skillful prosecutor can come up with.

To lessen the force of these considerations, an enemy of free discussion might say this:

There is no need for *mankind in general* to know and understand all that can be said against or for their opinions by philosophers and theologians. There is no need for common people to be able to expose all the misstatements or fallacies of an ingenious opponent. It is enough if there is always *somebody* capable of answering them, so that anything that is likely to mislead uneducated persons will be refuted. Simple minds, having been taught the obvious grounds of the truths they have learned, may trust to authority for the rest. They are aware that they have neither knowledge nor talent to resolve every difficulty that can be raised, and can feel secure in the thought that all the difficulties that have been •raised have been (or can be) •answered by those who are specially trained for that task.

What I am up against here are people who don't demand that •belief in a truth should be accompanied by much •understanding of it. Well, for purposes of argument I shall concede to them that the above line of thought is right—I'll let them have as much of it as they could possibly claim. Even with that much conceded, the argument for free discussion is in no way weakened. For even this doctrine acknowledges that mankind ought to have a rational assurance that all objections have been satisfactorily answered; and how can they be answered if they haven't been uttered? Also, how can an answer be known to be satisfactory if the objectors have no opportunity to show that it is not? If not •the public, then at least •the philosophers and theologians who are to resolve the difficulties must become familiar with them in their most challenging form; and this can't happen unless the difficulties are freely stated and placed in the most advantageous light that they are capable of. The Catholic Church has its own way of dealing with this embarrassing problem. It makes a sweeping distinction between •those who can be permitted to receive its doctrines through becoming convinced of them and •those who must take them on trust. Neither group is allowed any choice as to *what* they will accept; but the clergy—or such of them as can be fully trusted—are allowed and even encouraged to make themselves acquainted with the arguments of opponents, in order to answer them; so they are permitted to read heretical books. Lay people may not do this without special permission, which is hard to obtain. This system recognizes that it is beneficial for •teachers to know the enemy's case, but finds a way of combining this with a denial of such knowledge to •the rest of the world—thus giving to the élite more mental culture than it allows to the mass, though not more mental freedom! By this device it succeeds in obtaining the kind of mental superiority that its purposes require; for

although culture without freedom never made a large and liberal mind, it can make a clever advocate of a cause. But in protestant countries this resource isn't available, because protestants hold, at least in theory, that the responsibility for the choice of a religion must be borne by each person for himself, and can't be passed off onto teachers. Besides, in the present state of the world, it is practically impossible that writings that are read by the instructed can be kept from the uninstructed. If mankind's teachers are to be know all that they ought to know, everything must be free to be written and published without restraint.

Here is something that might be thought:

When the publicly accepted opinions are true, if the harm done by the absence of free discussion of them were merely that men are left ignorant of the grounds of those opinions, this may be an intellectual evil but it isn't a moral one; it doesn't affect the value of the opinions so far as their influence on character is concerned.

In fact, however, the absence of discussion leads men to forget not only the •grounds for an opinion but too often also its •meaning. The words in which it is expressed cease to suggest ideas, or suggest only a small portion of the ideas they were originally used to communicate. Instead of a vivid conception and a living belief, there remain only a few phrases learned by heart; or if any part of the meaning is retained it is only the shell and husk of it, the finer essence being lost. This fact fills a great chapter in human history—one that cannot be too earnestly studied and meditated on.

It is illustrated in the experience of almost all ethical doctrines and religious creeds. They are all full of meaning and vitality to those who originate them, and to their immediate disciples. As long as a doctrine or creed is struggling for ascendancy over other creeds, its meaning continues

to be felt as strongly as—and perhaps even more strongly than—it was at the outset. Eventually either •it prevails and becomes the general opinion or •its progress stops, in which case it keeps possession of the ground it has gained but doesn't spread any further. When either of these results has become apparent, controversy about the doctrine slackens and gradually dies away. The doctrine has taken its place as a publicly accepted opinion or as one of the recognized sects or divisions of opinion; most of its present adherents have inherited it rather than being convinced of it by reasons, and they don't give much thought to the idea of anyone's being converted from their doctrine to some other, because such conversions happen so rarely. At first they were constantly on the alert, either to defend themselves against the world or to bring the world over to their side; but now they have subsided into a passive state in which they •don't (if they can help it) listen to arguments against their creed, and •don't trouble dissentients (if there are any) with arguments in its favour. It is usually at about this stage in its history that the doctrine starts to lose its living power. We often hear the teachers of all creeds lamenting the difficulty of keeping up in the minds of believers a lively awareness of the truth to which they pay lip-service, so that the truth may penetrate their feelings and acquire a real mastery over their conduct. No such difficulty is complained of while the creed is still fighting for its existence; at that stage even the weaker combatants know and feel •what they are fighting for and •how it differs from other doctrines. And at that same stage in any creed's existence, a good many people may be found who have brought its fundamental principles to bear on all the forms of thought, have weighed and considered them in all their important bearings, and have experienced the full effect on their characters which belief in that creed *ought* to produce in a mind thoroughly saturated with it.

But when the creed has come to be hereditary, and to be accepted passively rather than actively—when the mind is no longer as compelled as it once was to exercise its vital powers on the questions that its belief presents to it—there’s a progressive tendency to forget all of the belief except the words expressing it, or to give it a dull and lethargic assent, as though by taking it on trust one freed oneself from any need to make it real in one’s mind, or to test it by personal experience; until it comes to have almost no connection with the person’s inner life. Then there are the cases, so frequent these days as almost to form the majority, in which the creed remains as it were outside the mind, like a hard shell protecting it against anything else that might be directed to the higher parts of our nature; manifesting its power by not letting any fresh and living conviction get in, but itself doing nothing for the mind or heart except standing guard over them to keep them vacant.

Doctrines that are intrinsically fitted to make the deepest impression on the mind can remain in it as dead beliefs, without being ever becoming *real* in the imagination, the feelings, or the understanding; and an example of the extent to which this can happen is provided by the manner in which the majority of believers hold the doctrines of Christianity. By ‘Christianity’ I here mean what is counted as such by all churches and sects—the maxims and injunctions contained in the New Testament. These are regarded as sacred and accepted as laws by all professing Christians, and yet hardly one Christian in a thousand guides or tests his individual conduct by reference to them. The standard to which he (·the typical Christian·) *does* refer his conduct is the custom of his nation, his class, or the members of his church. So he has on one hand

a collection of ethical maxims which he believes to have been delivered to him by infallible wisdom as

rules for him to govern himself by,
and on the other

a set of everyday judgments and practices, which
•go a certain distance with some of those maxims,
•go a shorter distance with others, •stand in direct
opposition to some, and •are—at the bottom line—a
compromise between the Christian creed and the
interests and suggestions of worldly life.

He pays lip-service to the first of these standards, but the one he actually steers by is the second. All Christians believe •that the blessed are the poor and humble and those who are ill-used by the world; •that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven; •that they should not judge lest they be judged; •that they should never swear; •that they should love their neighbour as themselves; •that if someone takes their cloak they should give him their coat also; •that they should take no thought for what the next day will bring; •that if they want to be perfect they should sell all their belongings and give the proceeds of the sale to the poor. They aren’t *insincere* when they say they believe these things. They do *believe* them in the way that people ‘believe’ what they have always heard praised and never heard discussed. But in the sense of ‘belief’ that refers to the living belief that regulates conduct, they believe these doctrines up to the point where it is *usual* to act on them, and no further. The doctrines—taken whole, as undivided lumps—·have two recognised uses·: •to throw at opponents, and •to put forward (when possible) as the reasons for things people do that they think are praiseworthy. But if you reminded them (·i.e. typical Christians·) that the maxims require an infinity of things that they never even *think* of doing, all you would achieve is being classified with those very unpopular characters who claim to be better than other people. The doctrines have no hold on ordinary

believers—they aren't a power in their minds. The believers have an habitual respect for the *sound* of them, but have no feeling that spreads from the words to the meanings, forcing the mind to take them in and make the believer's conduct conform to the formula. When it's a question of how to behave, the believer looks around for Mr. A and Mr. B to tell him how far to go in obeying Christ.

We can be sure that with the early Christians the situation was *very* different from this. If it had then been the way it is now, Christianity would never have expanded from an obscure sect of the despised Hebrews into the religion of the Roman empire. When their enemies said 'See how these Christians love one another' (a remark not likely to be made by anybody now), they assuredly had a much livelier sense of the meaning of their creed than they have ever had since. This lack of lively inner conviction on the part of most Christians is probably the main reason why Christianity now makes so little progress in extending its domain, and after eighteen centuries is still mostly confined to Europeans and the descendants of Europeans. Even with strictly religious people who are much in earnest about their doctrines and attach much more *meaning* to them than do people in general, it commonly happens that this comparatively active religious component in their minds comes from Calvin or Knox or some such person much nearer in character to themselves. The sayings of Christ sit passively in their minds, producing hardly any effect beyond what is caused by merely listening to such amiable and bland words. No doubt there are many reasons why doctrines that are the badge of one particular sect retain more of their vitality than do ones that are common to all recognized sects, and why teachers take more trouble to keep the meaning of the former alive; but one reason certainly is that a doctrine that is special to one particular sect is more questioned, and

has to be oftener defended against open opponents. Both teachers and learners go to sleep at their post when there is no enemy to be guarded against.

The same thing holds true, generally speaking, of all *traditional* doctrines—not just those of morals and religion, but also doctrines about what it is prudent to do and how to go about living your life. All languages and literatures are full of general observations on life—what it is, and how to live it—observations that everybody knows, that everybody repeats or hears and agrees to, that are accepted as truisms, but which most people don't really know the meaning of until experience, generally of a painful kind, makes it a reality to them. It often happens that someone suffering from an unforeseen misfortune or disappointment calls to mind some proverb or common saying that has been familiar to him all his life, and that would have saved him from the calamity if he had ever *felt* its meaning as he does now. There are indeed reasons for this other than the absence of discussion: there are many truths whose full meaning can't be realized—made *real* in the mind—until personal experience has brought it home. But even with these, much more of the meaning would have been understood, and what was understood would have been far more deeply impressed on the mind, if the man had been accustomed to hear it argued pro and con by people who did understand it. The fatal tendency of mankind to give up thinking about something when it is no longer doubtful is the cause of half their errors. A contemporary author has well spoken of 'the deep slumber of a decided opinion'.

You might ask:

Is the absence of unanimity required for true knowledge? Is it the case that for any part of mankind to realize the truth some other part must persist in error? Does a belief stop being real and living as soon as it is generally accepted—and is a proposition

never thoroughly understood and felt unless some doubt about it remains? As soon as mankind have unanimously accepted a truth, does the truth perish within them? It has always been thought that the highest aim and best result of improved intelligence is to unite mankind increasingly in the acknowledgment of all important truths; does this intelligence last only as long as it *hasn't* achieved its aim? Do the fruits of conquest perish because of the very completeness of the victory?

I affirm no such thing. As mankind improve, the number of doctrines that are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase; and the well-being of mankind could almost be measured by the number and importance of the truths that have reached the point of being uncontested. The ending of serious controversy on one question after another is a necessary aspect of the consolidation of opinion; and such consolidation is as healthy in the case of true opinions as it is dangerous and poisonous when the opinions are wrong. But although this gradual lessening of the area of diversity of opinion is 'necessary' in both senses of the term—being at once *inevitable* and *absolutely needed*—it doesn't follow that *all* its consequences are beneficial. The need to explain a truth to its opponents or to defend it against them is an important aid to the intelligent and living *grasp* of it; and the loss of that aid is a disadvantage in its being universally recognized and thus having no opponents. It isn't enough to outweigh the benefit of universal recognition of a truth, but still it's a real drawback. Where this advantage can no longer be had, I would like to see the teachers of mankind trying to provide a substitute for it—some device for making the difficulties of the question as vivid in the learner's consciousness as if they were being urged by someone trying hard to convert him to an opposing position.

But instead of looking for ways to do this, the teachers have lost the instructive devices they formerly had. The Socratic dialectics [= inquiry through argument and counter-argument], so splendidly exemplified in the dialogues of Plato, were a device of the sort I am recommending. They were essentially a negative discussion of the great questions of philosophy and life, directed with enormous skill to convincing someone who had merely adopted the commonplaces of publicly accepted opinion that he didn't understand the subject, and didn't yet attach any definite meaning to the doctrines he proclaimed; so that in becoming aware of his ignorance the pupil might be put on the way to attaining a stable belief, resting on a clear grasp both of the meaning of doctrines and of the grounds for them. The formal debates in the universities of the middle ages had a somewhat similar purpose. They were intended to ensure that the pupil understood his own opinion and the opinion opposed to it, and could enforce the grounds of the one and refute those of the other. (The two understandings—of the two opposing opinions—of course go hand in hand.) These mediaeval debates had indeed an incurable defect, namely that the premises appealed to were taken from authority and not from reason; and they were nothing like as good a discipline for the mind as were the powerful dialectics that shaped the intellects of Socrates' companions; but the modern mind owes far more to both than it is generally willing to admit, and the present methods of education contain nothing that replaces either of them in the slightest. A person who gets all his instruction from teachers or books, even if he resists the continual temptation to settle for *cramming* [= 'intensive unreflective last-minute study in preparation for an exam'], is under no compulsion to hear both sides; with the result that it is quite unusual, even among thinkers, for someone to know both sides; and the weakest part of what everybody says

in defence of his own opinion is what he has prepared as a reply to opponents. It is currently fashionable to belittle negative logic—the kind that points out weaknesses in theory or errors in practice, without establishing positive truths. Such negative criticism would indeed be a pretty poor •final result, but as a •means to attaining any positive knowledge or belief worthy of the name it is enormously valuable; and until people are again systematically trained in it there will be few great thinkers, and a low average level of intellect, in all branches of learning and research except mathematics and the physical sciences. On any other subject a person's opinions deserve the name of 'knowledge' only to the extent that he has—either on his own initiative or forced to it by others—gone through the same mental process that would have been required of him in carrying on an active controversy with opponents. When we don't have controversy, it is sorely missed and difficult to create artificially; so how absurd it is—how *worse* than absurd—to deprive oneself of it when it occurs spontaneously! If there are people who dispute a publicly accepted opinion, or who will dispute it if not prevented by law or social pressure, let us *thank* them for it, open our minds to listen to them, and rejoice that someone will do for us what we otherwise would have to do for ourselves, with much greater labour. (Or, anyway, what we otherwise *ought* to do if we have any regard for the certainty *or* the vitality of our convictions.)

There is yet another powerful reason why diversity of opinion can be advantageous—a reason that will hold good until mankind advances to an intellectual level that at present seems incalculably far off. We have so far considered only two possibilities: that •the publicly accepted opinion is false, and therefore some other opinion is true; and that •the publicly accepted opinion is true, but a conflict with the opposite error is essential to a clear grasp and deep

feeling of its truth. However, there is a commoner case than either of these, namely: •the conflicting doctrines. . . . share the truth between them, and the minority opinion is needed to provide the remainder of the truth, of which the publicly accepted doctrine captures only a part. On matters other than plain empirical fact, popular opinions are often true but are seldom or never the whole truth. They are a part of the truth—sometimes a large part, sometimes a small—but exaggerated, distorted, and torn apart from other truths that ought to accompany them and set limits to them. Minority opinions, on the other hand, are generally some of these suppressed and neglected truths, bursting the bonds that kept them down and either •seeking reconciliation with the truth contained in the common opinion or •confronting it as enemies and setting themselves up as the whole truth. The latter case has always been the most frequent, because in the human mind one-sidedness has always been the rule and many-sidedness the exception. Hence, even in •revolutions of opinion one part of the truth usually sets while another rises [the comparison is with the setting and rising of the sun in the daily •revolutions of the earth]. Even *progress*, which ought to add truth to truth, usually only substitutes one partial and incomplete truth for another; and any improvement this brings comes mainly from the fact that the new fragment of truth is more wanted, better suited to the needs of the time, than was the one it displaces. Even when a prevailing opinion is basically true, it will be so partial that every •rival-opinion that embodies some part of the truth that the other omits ought to be considered precious, no matter how much error and confusion it blends in with its portion of truth. No reasonable person will be indignant because those who force on our notice truths that we would otherwise have overlooked do themselves overlook some of the truths that we see. Rather, a reasonable person will think that so long as

popular truth is one-sided, it is more desirable than regrettable that unpopular truth should have one-sided defenders too, because they—the one-sided ones—are usually the most energetic and the most likely to compel reluctant attention to the fragment of wisdom that they proclaim as if it were the whole.

Consider how things stood in the eighteenth century:

Nearly all educated people and *all* the uneducated people who were led by them were lost in admiration of what is called 'civilization', and of the marvels of modern science, literature, and philosophy. Greatly exaggerating the unlikeness between the men of modern times and those of ancient times, they cherished the belief that the differences were entirely in *their* favour.

What a salutary shock they received when the paradoxes of Rousseau exploded like bombshells in their midst! Rousseau's views broke up the compact mass of one-sided opinion, and forced its elements to recombine in a better form and with additional ingredients. It's not that the generally accepted opinions were on the whole further from the truth than Rousseau's were; on the contrary, they were nearer to it, containing more positive truth and very much less error. Nevertheless Rousseau's doctrine contained a considerable amount of exactly those truths that were lacking from the general opinion; these truths floated down the stream of opinion, and are the deposit that was left behind when the flood subsided. •The superior worth of simplicity of life, •the enervating and demoralizing effect of the constraints and clutter and hypocrisies of artificial society, are •ideas that have never been entirely absent from cultivated minds since Rousseau wrote; and in time they will produce their due effect, though at present they have as much need to be asserted as they ever did—and asserted by *deeds*, because

words on this subject have nearly exhausted their power.

Another example: In politics it is almost a commonplace that a healthy state of political life requires that there be a party of •order or stability and a party of •progress or reform, until one or other of them enlarges its mental grasp enough to become a party equally of •order and of •progress, knowing what is fit to be preserved and what ought to be swept away.

Each of these ways of thinking

gets its usefulness from the deficiencies of the other, but also to a great extent

is kept sane and reasonable by the opposition of the other.

Consider the standing antagonisms of practical life, including: democracy vs. aristocracy, property vs. equality, co-operation vs. competition, luxury vs. abstinence, sociality vs. individuality, liberty vs. discipline, and so on. Unless opinions favourable to *each* side of each of these are expressed with equal freedom and pressed and defended with equal talent and energy, there is no chance of both the conflicting elements obtaining their due; one scale is sure to go up and the other down. In the great practical concerns of life, truth is very much a matter of reconciling and combining opposites—so much so that few people have minds that are capacious and impartial enough to make the adjustment anything like correctly, so that it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners. With any of the great open questions I have listed, if either of the two rival opinions has a better claim than the other to be (not merely tolerated but) encouraged and countenanced, it is the one that happens to be the minority opinion at a given time and place. That is the one that for the time being represents the neglected interests, the aspect of human well-being that is in danger of obtaining less than its share. I am aware that in this country

now there is no intolerance of differences of opinion on most of these topics. I bring them forward just as unquestionable examples of the universal fact that in the existing state of the human intellect the only chance of fair play for all sides of the truth is through diversity of opinion. Even when the world is almost unanimous on some subject and is *right* about it, people who disagree—if there are any to be found—probably have something to say for themselves that is worth hearing, and truth would lose something by their silence.

It may be objected:

But some publicly accepted principles, especially on the highest and most vital subjects, are more than half-truths. Christian morality, for instance, is the whole truth on that subject and anyone who teaches a morality that varies from it is wholly in error.

This is in practice the most important of all the cases, so it none can be better for testing the general maxim. But before pronouncing on what Christian morality is or is not, it would be desirable to decide what ‘Christian morality’ means. If it means the morality of the New Testament, I am surprised that anyone who knows about it from the book itself can suppose that it was announced or intended as a complete doctrine of morals. The gospel always refers to a pre-existing morality, and confines its precepts to matters in respect of which that morality was to be corrected or superseded by a wider and higher one. Also, these precepts are expressed in extremely general terms, and often can’t possibly be interpreted literally; they have the impressiveness of poetry or eloquence rather than the precision of legislation. It has never been possible to extract a body of ethical doctrine from this without eking it out from •the Old Testament, that is, from •a system that is elaborate enough but in many respects barbarous, and intended only for a barbarous people. St. Paul, a declared enemy to this Judaic mode

of interpreting the doctrine of his master and of filling in the gaps in it, also assumes a pre-existing morality •but a different one•, namely that of the Greeks and Romans; and his advice to Christians is largely a system of coming to terms with *that*, even to the extent of seeming to endorse slavery. What is called ‘Christian morality’, but should rather be termed ‘theological morality’, was not the work of Christ or the apostles, but is of much later origin. It was gradually built up by the Catholic Church of the first five centuries, and though moderns and protestants don’t automatically accept it as authoritative, they have modified it much less than might have been expected. For the most part, indeed, they have contented themselves with •cutting off the parts that had been added to it in the middle ages and •replacing those by fresh additions selected according to the character and tendencies of the sect in question. I would be the last person to deny that mankind owes a great debt to this morality and to its early teachers; but I don’t hesitate to say that in many important respects it is incomplete and one-sided, and that human affairs would have been in a worse condition than they now are if it hadn’t been that ideas and feelings from *outside* this morality contributed to the formation of European life and character. Christian morality (so called) has all the marks of a *reaction*; it is to a large extent protest against paganism. Its ideal is

- innocence rather than nobleness, and
- abstinence from evil rather than energetic pursuit of good.

And this means that its ideal is

- negative rather than positive, and
- passive rather than active.

It has been well said that in its precepts ‘thou shalt not’ predominates unduly over ‘thou shalt’. In its horror of the pleasures of the senses it made an idol of asceticism,

which has been gradually trimmed down into a mere idol of rule-following. In holding out the hope of heaven and the threat of hell as the official and appropriate motives for a virtuous life, this morality falls far below the best of the ancients, and does what it can to make human morality essentially selfish, by disconnecting each man's feelings of duty from the interests of his fellow-creatures except so far as a self-interested inducement is offered to him for attending to them. It is essentially a doctrine of passive obedience; it teaches obedience to all established governmental authorities; not that they are to be actively obeyed when they command something that religion forbids, but they aren't to be resisted—let alone rebelled against—for any amount of wrong to ourselves. And while in the morality of the best pagan nations there's a place for duty to the state—a disproportionate place, even, infringing on the just liberty of the individual—in purely Christian ethics that grand department of duty is scarcely noticed or acknowledged. [Mill's point is that Christian ethics enjoins *obedience* to the state, but not self-directed positive *service* to the state.] It is in the Koran, not the New Testament, that we read the maxim 'A ruler who appoints any man to an office when there is in his dominions another man better qualified for it sins against God and against the state.' What little recognition the idea of obligation to the public obtains in modern morality is derived from Greek and Roman sources, not from Christian ones; just as in the morality of private life whatever there is in the way of magnanimity, high-mindedness, personal dignity, even the sense of honour, is derived from the purely human and not the religious part of our education, and never could have grown out of a standard of ethics in which the only officially recognized value is that of obedience.

I fully concede that there could be forms of Christian ethics that were free of these defects, and that Christian

ethics could be made *consistent with* the many requisites of a complete moral doctrine that it doesn't actually *contain*. And I would say this even more strenuously about the doctrines and precepts of Christ himself. I believe that the sayings of Christ are everything they were apparently intended to be; that they can be reconciled with anything that a comprehensive morality requires; that everything that is excellent in ethics can be brought within their scope with no more violence to their language than has been done to it by all who have tried to deduce from them any practical system of conduct whatever. But it is quite consistent with this to believe that the sayings of Christ contain only a part of the truth and weren't meant to contain more; that many essential elements of the highest morality

- aren't provided for (or intended to be provided for) in the recorded sayings of the founder of Christianity, and
- have been entirely thrown aside in the system of ethics that the Christian church has erected on the basis of those sayings.

So I think it a great error to persist in trying to find in Christian doctrine the *complete rule for our guidance* which its author intended that doctrine to endorse and enforce but only partially to provide. I also believe that this narrow theory is becoming a grave practical evil, detracting greatly from the value of the moral training and instruction that so many well-meaning people are now at last working to promote. These people try to form minds on an exclusively religious pattern, discarding those non-religious standards that used to coexist with and supplement Christian ethics, receiving some of its spirit and giving it some of theirs. I greatly fear that this will result—that it is *now resulting*—in a low, abject, servile type of character, one that may submit itself to what it thinks is the Supreme Will but can't rise to

or •feel for the conception of Supreme Goodness. The moral regeneration of mankind, I believe, will require that Christian ethics exist side by side with other ethical principles that can't be developed from exclusively Christian sources. The Christian system is no exception to the rule that in an imperfect state of the human mind the interests of truth require a diversity of opinions. It isn't necessary that in starting to attend to moral truths *not* contained in Christianity men should ignore any of the ones it *does* contain. Such prejudice or oversight, when it occurs, is altogether bad. Still, we can't hope to avoid it altogether, and it must be regarded as the price to be paid for an incalculable good. When one part of the truth is claimed to be the whole of it, this must and ought to be protested against; and if the protestors' sense of the unfairness of this makes them unjust in their turn, this one-sidedness may be lamented just as the other was. *But it must be tolerated.* If Christians want to teach unbelievers to be fair to Christianity, they should themselves be fair to unbelief. Much of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work not only of men who didn't know the Christian faith but also of men who knew and rejected it; anyone who has the most ordinary acquaintance with literary history knows this; running away from it can't do the truth any service.

I don't claim that the most unlimited use of freedom in expressing all possible opinions would put an end to the evils of religious or philosophical sectarianism. Every truth that men with limited minds are in earnest about is sure to be •asserted, •taught, and in many ways even •acted on as if no other truth existed in the world, or anyway none that could limit or restrict the first. All opinions tend to become sectarian, and I admit that very free discussion is not a cure for this. Indeed, discussion heightens and worsens sectarianism; truth that ought to be seen may be

rejected all the more violently because it is proclaimed by people regarded •by the sectarians• as opponents. But it is not on the impassioned partisan, but rather on the calmer and more disinterested [= 'not *self*-interested'] bystander, that this collision of opinions has a healthy effect. The really threatening evil is not •the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but •the quiet suppression of half of it. When people are forced to listen to both sides, there are grounds for hope; it's when they attend to only one side that errors harden into prejudices, and truth itself stops acting like truth because it comes to be exaggerated into falsehood. *Very few people have the mental capacity to*

sit in intelligent judgment between two sides of a question, of which only one is represented by an advocate.

•Because of the scarcity of people with *that skill*•, truth has no chance except to the extent that every side of it, every opinion that embodies any fraction of it, has advocates who can get themselves listened to.

I have argued that freedom of opinion, and freedom of the expression of opinion, are needed for the mental well-being of mankind (on which all other kinds of well-being depend). I now briefly repeat my four distinct reasons for this view. **1** An opinion that is compelled to silence may, for all we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility. **2** Even when the silenced opinion is an error, it can and very commonly does contain a portion of the truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any topic is rarely if ever the whole truth •about it•, it is only through the collision of conflicting opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied. Thirdly, even if the publicly accepted opinion is not only true but is the whole truth •on the subject in question•, unless it is vigorously and earnestly disputed most of those who accept it will have it

in the manner ·merely· of a prejudice, with little grasp or sense of what its rational grounds are. And also (this being my fourth argument), the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost or weakened, and deprived of its vital effect on character and conduct. It will become a mere formal pronouncement, effective not in doing any good but only in cluttering up the ground and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction from reason or personal experience.

Before leaving the topic of freedom of opinion, I should discuss the view that the free expression of all opinions should be permitted on condition that the expression is temperate and doesn't exceed the bounds of fair discussion. How are these supposed bounds to be fixed? Is the criterion that the bounds have been passed if those whose opinion is attacked are offended? ·That would be useless, because· experience shows that offence is given whenever the attack is telling and powerful, and that every opponent who pushes them hard and whom they find it difficult to answer appears to them (if he shows any strong feeling on the subject) to be an intemperate opponent. This fixing of the boundaries to temperateness could be discussed at length, and it is an important consideration from a practical point of view; but ·I shan't pursue it any further on its own, because· it merges into a more fundamental objection ·to the demand for temperateness in debate·. Undoubtedly the manner of asserting an opinion, even a true one, may be very objectionable and may rightly be severely criticized. But the *principal* offences of this kind—i.e. offences in the *manner* of conducting a debate—are such that it is usually impossible to convict the offender unless he accidentally gives himself away. The most serious of them is to argue invalidly, to suppress facts or arguments, to misstate the elements of the case, or misrepresent the opposite opinion.

But all this is continually done—often to an extreme—in perfect good faith by people who aren't regarded as ignorant or incompetent (and in many other respects may not *be* ignorant or incompetent); so that there are seldom adequate grounds for a conscientious accusation of *morally* culpable misrepresentation; and still less could the law presume to interfere with this kind of misconduct in controversy. As for what is commonly meant by 'intemperate' discussion, namely invective, sarcasm, personal insults, and the like: the denunciation of *these* weapons ·of debate· would deserve more sympathy if it were ever proposed to forbid them equally to both sides; but ·in practice· it is desired to restrain the use of them only against the prevailing opinion. Against the *unprevailing* opinion they may not only be used without general disapproval but will be likely to lead to the person's being praised for his honest zeal and righteous indignation. Yet the harm that is done by these ·weapons of debate· is greatest when they are used against the comparatively defenceless; and whatever unfair advantage an opinion can get from being defended in this way goes almost exclusively to publicly accepted opinions. The worst offence of this kind that can be committed by a controversialist is to brand those who hold the contrary opinion as bad and immoral men. Those who hold some unpopular opinion are especially vulnerable to slander of this sort, because usually they are few and uninfluential, and nobody else feels much interest in seeing justice done to them. But from the nature of the case *they* can't use this weapon against defenders of a prevailing opinion: it wouldn't be safe for them to use it, and anyway it wouldn't achieve anything for them and would merely reflect back on their own cause. In general, opinions contrary to those that are commonly accepted can obtain a hearing only by carefully moderate language and the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offence, from which they hardly

ever deviate even slightly without losing ground; whereas unmeasured abuse employed on the side of the prevailing opinion really does deter people from proclaiming contrary opinions and from listening to those who proclaim them. In the interests of truth and justice, therefore, it is far more important to restrain *this* employment of abusive language than the other; for example, if we had to choose, there would be much more need to discourage offensive attacks on unbelief than offensive attacks on religion. But it is obvious that •law and •authority have no business restraining either of them. And here is what •opinion should do, .i.e. what *we* should all do. We ought to base our verdict on the circumstances of the individual case, condemning anyone—on either side

of the argument—whose mode of advocacy shows lack of candour, or malignity, bigotry or intolerance of feeling. But we shouldn't *infer* these vices from the side that a person takes .in the debate., even if it is the opposite side to our own. And we should give deserved honour to everyone, whatever opinion he may hold, who has the •calmness to see and the •honesty to state what his opponents and their opinions really are, exaggerating nothing to their discredit and keeping back nothing that might be thought to count in their favour. This is the real morality of public discussion; and even if it is often violated, I am happy to think that there are many controversialists who to a great extent observe it and even more who conscientiously try to do so.

Chapter 3: Individuality—one of the elements of well-being

I have presented •the reasons that make it imperative that human beings should be free to form opinions and to express them openly, and •the pernicious consequences to the intellectual nature of man (and through that to his moral nature) unless this freedom is either granted or claimed in spite of being prohibited. Now let us see whether those same reasons don't require that men should be free to *act* on their opinions—to carry them out in their lives, without physical or moral hindrance from their fellow-men, *so long as they are acting at their own risk and peril*. This last proviso is of course indispensable. No-one claims that actions should be as free as opinions. On the contrary, even opinions lose their immunity when the circumstances in which they are expressed are such that merely expressing them is a positive incitement to some harmful act. The opinion that *corn-dealers are starvers of the poor* ought to be allowed to pass freely when it is simply presented to the world in print; but someone can justly be punished for announcing it orally or passing it out on a placard to an excited mob that has gathered in front of a corn-dealer's house. (Another example might be the opinion that *private property is robbery*.) Acts of any kind that harm others without justifiable cause may be—and in the more important cases absolutely must be—brought under control, either by adverse opinion or (when necessary) by active interference. The liberty of the individual must be limited by this:

He must not adversely affect other people.

[Mill's actual words: 'He must not make himself a nuisance to other people.'] But if he refrains from interfering with others in things that are their own concern, and merely acts according to his own inclination and judgment in things that concern

himself, he should be freely allowed to put his opinions into practice at his own cost; and the reasons for this are the very ones that show that opinion should be free:

- mankind are not infallible;
- their truths are mostly only half-truths;
- uniformity of opinion is not desirable unless it results from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions;
- diversity of opinion is a good thing, not a bad one, until mankind become much more able than at present to recognize all sides of the truth.

These principles apply as much to men's conduct as to their opinions. Just as it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that •there should be different experiments in living; that •different kinds of personal character should be given free scope as long as they don't injure others; and that •the value of different ways of life should be tried out in practice when anyone wants to try them. It is desirable, in short, that in matters that don't primarily concern others individuality should assert itself. When a person's conduct is ruled not by *his* character but by the traditions or customs of *others*, one of the principal ingredients of human happiness—and *the* chief ingredient of individual and social progress—is lacking.

The greatest difficulty one meets in maintaining this principle doesn't come from •people's views about the means to an acknowledged end, but from •their indifference to the end in question. If it were •generally felt

that the free development of individuality is a leading essential of well-being; that it isn't merely something that comes along with all that we mean by the terms

‘civilization’, ‘instruction’, ‘education’ and ‘culture’, but is itself a necessary part and precondition of all those things,

there would be no danger of liberty’s being undervalued, and no great difficulty about settling the boundaries between it and social control. The trouble is that in the thinking of most people individual spontaneity is hardly recognized as having any intrinsic value, or as deserving any respect on its own account. The majority are satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are (·of course·, for it is they who *make* them what they are!), and they can’t understand why those ways shouldn’t be good enough for everybody. As for moral and social reformers—who by definition are *not* satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are—the majority of *them* don’t have spontaneity as any part of their ideal; rather, they look on it with resentment, as a troublesome and perhaps rebellious obstruction to the general acceptance of what these reformers themselves think would be best for mankind. Wilhelm von Humboldt, so eminent both for his learning and as a politician, based one of his works on the thesis that

•the end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal or immutable dictates of reason and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole;

that therefore,

•that towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow-men must ever keep their eyes, is the individuality of power and development;

that •for this two things are needed, ‘freedom, and a variety of situations’; and that •from the combination of these arise

‘individual vigour and great diversity’, which combine themselves in ‘originality’ [Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Sphere and Duties of Government*]. Few people outside Germany even understood what he meant!

And yet, although most people are unaccustomed to a doctrine like that of von Humboldt, and surprised to find anyone attaching so high a value to individuality, one has to think that the issue—the difference between the majority view and von Humboldt’s—can only be one of *degree*. •Looking at it from one side·: No-one’s idea of excellence in conduct is that people should do *absolutely nothing* but copy one another. No-one would assert that people ought not to put into their way of life, and into their handling of their affairs, *any* mark whatever of their own judgment or of their own individual character. •On the other hand, it would be absurd to ·value individuality so absolutely as to· claim that people ought to live as if nothing whatever had been known in the world before they came into it; as if experience so far had done nothing towards showing that one way of life or course of conduct is preferable to another. Nobody denies that people should be taught and trained in youth so that they can know what has been learned from human experience and can benefit from it. But when a human being has arrived at the maturity of his faculties, it is his privilege—and indeed his proper role—to use and interpret experience *in his own way*. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character. The traditions and customs of other people provide some evidence of what their experience has taught *them*—evidence that has some weight, and thus has a claim to his deference. But ·there are three reasons for not giving it the final decision about how he should live his life·. In the first place, •those people’s experience may be too narrow, or they may not have interpreted it

rightly. Secondly, •their interpretation of their experience may be correct but unsuitable to him. Customs are made for customary circumstances and customary character; and *his* circumstances or his character may be uncustomary. Thirdly, •even when the customs are good in themselves and are suitable to him, still •he ought not• to conform to custom as such, •because that• doesn't educate or develop in him any of the qualities that are the distinctive endowment of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference are exercised only in making choices. He who does something *because it is the custom* doesn't make a choice. He gains no practice either in seeing what is best or in wanting it. Like our muscular powers, our mental and moral powers are improved only by being used. You don't bring your faculties into play by •doing something merely because others do it, any more than by •believing something only because others believe it. If the reasons for an opinion are not conclusive in *your* way of thinking, your reason can't be strengthened by your adopting the opinion, and is likely instead to be weakened; and if the reasons for acting in a certain way are not in harmony with *your* feelings and character, acting in that way is contributing towards making your feelings and character inert and slack rather than active and energetic. (I am here setting aside cases where personal affections or the rights of others come into the picture.)

He who lets the world (or his own portion of it) choose his plan of life for him doesn't need any faculty other than the ape-like ability to *imitate*. He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties. He must use

observation to see,
reasoning and judgment to foresee,
activity to gather materials for decision,
discrimination to decide,

and, when he has decided,

firmness and self-control to keep to his deliberate decision.

And *how much* he requires and uses these abilities depends directly on *how much* of his conduct is determined according to his own judgment and feelings. He *might* be guided in some good path, and kept out of harm's way, without any of these things. But •in that case• what will be his comparative worth as a human being? It really does *matter* not only what men do but also what sort of men they are that do it. Among the works of man that human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, surely the most important is man himself. Supposing it were possible to get houses built, corn grown, battles fought, cases tried, and even churches erected and prayers said, by machinery—by automatons in human form—it would be a considerable loss to accept automatons in exchange for men and women, even the men and women who at present inhabit the more civilized parts of the world, who are poor specimens of what nature can and will produce. Human nature is not a machine to be built on the basis of a blueprint, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it; rather, it is a tree that needs to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces that make it a living thing.

It will probably be conceded that it is desirable for people to exercise their understandings, and that an intelligent following of custom or even occasionally an intelligent deviation from custom is better than following custom in a blind and mechanical way. To a certain extent it is admitted that our •understanding should be our own. But there isn't the same willingness to admit that our •desires and impulses should likewise be our own, or to admit that it is anything but a peril and a snare to possess impulses of our own, unless they are extremely weak. Yet desires and impulses

are as much a part of a perfect human being as beliefs and restraints. Strong impulses are perilous only when they aren't properly balanced—i.e. when one set of aims and inclinations is developed into strength while others that ought to coexist with them remain weak and inactive. Men act badly not because their desires are strong but because their consciences are weak. There is no natural connection between strong impulses and a weak conscience. The natural connection is the other way. [Those two sentences are as Mill wrote them. Perhaps he means that strong impulses tend to produce not weak consciences but strong ones.] To say that •one person's desires and feelings are stronger and more various than those of someone else is merely to say that •he has more of the raw material of human nature, and is therefore capable perhaps of more evil but certainly of more good. Strong impulses are but another name for *energy*. Energy can be turned to bad uses, but more good can always come from an energetic nature than from a slack and impassive one. Those who have most *natural* feeling are always those whose *cultivated* feelings—the ones developed through education, experience, and thought—can also be made the strongest. The •strong susceptibilities that make personal impulses vivid and powerful are also the source of the most passionate love of virtue and the sternest self-control. Society does its duty *and* protects its interests by developing •*these*, not by rejecting the stuff of which heroes are made because *it* doesn't know how to make them! A person whose desires and impulses are his own—expressing his own nature as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a *character*. (One whose desires and impulses are not his own doesn't have a character, any more than a steam-engine does.) If the impulses are not only *his* but are *strong*, and are under the control of a strong will, then he has an *energetic* character. If you think that individuality

of desires and impulses shouldn't be encouraged to unfold itself, you must maintain that society doesn't need strong natures—that it isn't the better for containing many people who have much character—and that a high average level of energy is not desirable.

In some early states of society, these forces of high-level individual energy were too far ahead of society's power at that time to discipline and control them. There was a time when the element of spontaneity and individuality was excessive, and social forces had a hard struggle with it. The difficulty then was to induce men with strong bodies or minds to obey any rules that required them to control their impulses. To overcome this difficulty, law and discipline behaved like the Popes in their struggle against the Emperors: they asserted a power over the whole man, claiming to control all his life in order to control his character, which society hadn't found any other sufficient means of binding. But society *now* has the upper hand over individuality; and the danger that threatens human nature is not too much but too little in the way of personal impulses and preferences. Things have vastly changed since the time when the passions of those who were strong (through their rank or position, or through their personal qualities) were in a state of habitual rebellion against laws and ordinances, and had to be strictly held down so that people within their reach might enjoy a little security. In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, everyone lives as though under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others but in what concerns *only themselves*, the individual or the family don't ask themselves:

what do I prefer? or
 what would suit my character and disposition? or
 what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive?

They ask themselves:

what is suitable to my position?

what is usually done by people in my position and economic level?

or (worse still)

what is usually done by people whose position and circumstances are superior to mine?

I don't mean that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It doesn't occur to them to *have* any inclination except to do what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bent under the yoke. Even in what people do *for pleasure*, conformity is the first thing they think of; they like in crowds [think of this as on a par with 'they walk in crowds']; they exercise choice only among things that are commonly done; they shun peculiarity of taste and eccentricity of conduct as much as they shun crimes. Eventually, by not following their own nature they come to have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved; they become incapable of any strong wishes or natural pleasures, and are generally without either •opinions or •feelings that are home-grown and properly *theirs*. Now is *this* the desirable condition of human nature?

It is so on the Calvinistic theory. According to it:

The one great offence of man is self-will. *Obedience* contains all the good of which humanity is capable. You have no choice; you must do this and nothing else; 'whatever isn't a duty is a sin'. Human nature is radically corrupt, so there is no redemption for anyone until human nature is killed within him.

To someone who holds this theory of life,

there is nothing wrong with crushing out any of the human faculties, capacities, and susceptibilities. The only capacity man needs is a capacity to surrender himself to the will of God; and if he uses any of •his

faculties for any purpose but to obey that supposed will more effectively, he is better without •them.

That is the theory of Calvinism; and it is held in a milder form by many who don't consider themselves Calvinists. The mildness consists in giving a less ascetic interpretation to the alleged will of God. They hold that it is his will that mankind should gratify some of their inclinations; not of course in the way they themselves prefer, but in the way of obedience—i.e. in a way prescribed to them by authority, and therefore inevitably the same for all. The crucial point about this 'milder' form of Calvinism is that it still doesn't allow for individuality of character.

In some such insidious [= 'sneaky'] form as this, there is at present a strong tendency to •adopt• this narrow theory of life and the pinched and hidebound type of human character that it favours. No doubt many people sincerely think that human beings thus cramped and dwarfed are as their maker designed them to be; just as many have thought that trees with all their lower branches removed or clipped into figures of animals are much finer than in their natural state. But if it is any part of religion to believe that man was made by a good Being, it is more consistent with that faith to believe •that this Being gave humans all their faculties to be developed and unfolded, not rooted out and incinerated, and •that he takes delight in every advance his creatures make towards the ideal of which they are capable, every increase in their ability to understand, to act, or to enjoy. According to the Calvinistic conception of humanity, we had our nature bestowed on us purely in order to have it stamped out. There is a different ideal of human excellence from that. 'Pagan self-assertion' is one of the elements of human worth, as well as 'Christian self-denial' (I take the phrases from John Sterling's *Essays*). There is a •Greek ideal of self-development, which the Platonic and Christian

ideal of self-government blends with but does not supersede. It may be better to be a John Knox than an Alcibiades, but it is better to be a Pericles than either; and if we had a Pericles today, he would have about him every good that John Knox had.

The way to make human beings become something noble and beautiful to see and think about is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in them but rather by cultivating it and enabling it to grow, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others. . . . And that is also the way to make human life become rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant nourishment for high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie that binds every individual to the human race by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to. The more each person develops his individuality, the more valuable he becomes to himself, and thus the more capable of being valuable to others. There is a greater fullness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass that is composed of them. There has to be as much compression of the mass as is necessary to prevent the stronger specimens of human nature from encroaching on the rights of others, but there is ample compensation for this even from the point of view of human development. The means of development that the individual loses by being prevented from gratifying his inclinations at the expense of others was chiefly obtained at the expense of the development of other people, so that *this* lessening of his development may produce an over-all gain in human development. And even for himself there is really no net loss, because what is suppressed in him in the interests of others is balanced by the better development of the social part of his nature, which is made possible by the restraint put on the selfish part. Being held to rigid rules of justice

for the sake of others develops the feelings and capacities that aim at the good of others. But being restrained in things that don't affect their *good*—restrained merely by their *displeasure*—develops nothing valuable except such force of character as may develop in resisting the restraint. If the restraint is accepted, it dulls and blunts the person's whole nature. To give any fair play to the nature of each person, it is essential that different people should be allowed to lead different lives. Historical periods have been noteworthy to posterity in proportion to how widely they have allowed this. Even despotism doesn't produce its worst effects so long as individuality exists under it; and whatever crushes individuality is despotism, whatever name it is given and whether it claims to be enforcing the will of God or the commands of men.

Having said that individuality is the same thing as development, and that the cultivation of individuality is the only thing that does or can produce well-developed human beings, I might here close the argument. For what more or better can be said of any condition of human affairs than that it brings human beings themselves nearer to the best they can be? or what worse can be said of any obstruction to good than that it prevents this? Doubtless, however, these considerations won't be enough to convince those who most need convincing. So I need also to show that these developed human beings are of some use to undeveloped ones—to point out, to those who don't want liberty and wouldn't avail themselves of it if they could, that *they* may be rewarded in some way they can understand for freely allowing other people to make use of liberty.

In the first place, then, I suggest that those who don't want liberty might possibly *learn* something from the exercise of liberty by those who do want it. No-one will deny that originality is a valuable element in human affairs.

There is always need for people not only •to discover new truths and point out when a former truth is true no longer, but also •to start new practices and to set the example of more enlightened conduct and of better taste and sense in human life. Someone who denied this would have to think that the world has already attained perfection in all its ways and practices! Admittedly, not everyone is able to provide this benefit; there are few people—a small fragment of the whole of mankind—whose experiments ·in living·, if adopted by others, would be likely to be an improvement on established practice. But these few are the salt of the earth; without them, human life would become a stagnant pool. I'm talking not only about the ones who introduce good things that didn't exist before, but also about those who keep alive the good things that already exist. If there were nothing new to be done, would human intellect cease to be necessary? Would it be a reason why those who do the old things should forget why they are done, and do them like cattle rather than like human beings? There is only too great a tendency for even the best beliefs and practices to degenerate into •something mechanical; and unless there were a succession of people whose ever-recurring originality prevents the grounds of those beliefs and practices from becoming merely traditional, such •dead matter wouldn't survive the smallest jolt from anything really alive, and there would be no reason why civilization shouldn't die out as did the Byzantine Empire. It's true that persons of genius are and probably always will be a small minority; but in order to have them we must preserve the soil in which they grow. [In Mill's time, 'genius' meant something like 'high intelligence combined with creative imagination'—something like what it means today, but not quite as strong.] Genius can breathe freely only in an *atmosphere* of freedom. Persons of genius are by definition more individual than other people—and therefore

less able to squeeze themselves, without being harmed, into any of the small number of moulds that society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character. If out of timidity they consent to be forced into one of these moulds, and to let all that part of themselves that can't expand under the pressure remain unexpanded, society won't gain much from their genius. If they are of a strong character and break their fetters, they become a target for the society that hasn't succeeded in reducing them to something commonplace, to point at with solemn warning as 'wild', 'erratic', and so on; like complaining against the Niagara river because it doesn't flow smoothly between its banks like a Dutch canal.

When I insist so emphatically on the importance of genius, and the need to allow it to unfold freely both in thought and in practice, I'm well aware •that no-one will deny this position in theory, and also •that almost everyone is really totally indifferent to it. People think genius a fine thing if it enables a man to write an exciting poem or paint a picture. But in the true sense of 'genius', that of originality in thought and action, though no-one says that it isn't a thing to be admired, most people secretly think they can do very well without it. This, alas, is too natural to be wondered at. Originality is the one thing that unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of. They can't see what it is to do for them—how could they? If they could see what it would do for them it wouldn't be originality. The first thing that originality has to do for them is to open their eyes; and if they got their eyes fully open, they too would have a chance of being original. Meanwhile, recollecting that nothing was ever yet done that someone didn't do *first*, and that all good things that exist are the fruits of originality, let them—the unoriginal people—•be modest enough to believe that there is something still left for originality to accomplish, and •assure themselves that the

less conscious they are of their lack of originality the greater is their need for it.

In sober truth, whatever may be said or even *done* to honour real or supposed mental superiority, the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the dominant power among mankind. In ancient history, in the middle ages, and to a lessening extent through the long transition from feudal times to the present, the individual was a power in himself; and if he had either great talents or a high social position he was a considerable power. These days individuals are lost in the crowd. In politics it almost goes without saying that public opinion now rules the world. The only *power* that deserves the name is that of the masses, and of governments when they act out the tendencies and instincts of the masses. This is as true in the *•moral* and social relations of private life as in *•public* transactions. Those whose opinions go by the name of 'public opinion' are not the same sort of public in every country: in America they are the whole white population, in England chiefly the middle class. But they are always a mass, that is to say, collective mediocrity. And a still greater novelty of the present age is this: the mass don't now take their opinions from dignitaries in church or state, from recognized leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers. I'm not complaining of all this. I don't assert that anything better is generally compatible with the present low state of the human mind. But that doesn't stop the government of mediocrity from being mediocre government. No government by democracy or a numerous aristocracy, either in its political acts or in the opinions, qualities, and tone of mind [Mill's phrase] that it encourages, ever did or could rise above mediocrity, except in so far as the all-powerful

•Many have let themselves be guided (which in their best times they always *have* done) by the advice and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed *•One* or *•Few*. All wise or noble things are and must be started by individuals; generally by some one individual. The honour and glory of the average man is that he is capable of *following* that start, that he can respond internally to wise and noble things and be led to them with his eyes open. I am not endorsing the sort of 'hero-worship' that applauds the strong man of genius for forcibly taking over the government of the world and making it do his bidding in spite of itself. All he is entitled to is *freedom to point out the way*. The power of *compelling* others to follow it is not only inconsistent with the freedom and development of everyone else but is also corrupting to the strong man himself. However, at a time when the opinions of masses of merely average men have become or are becoming the dominant power, it does seem that what is needed as a counter-weight and corrective to that tendency is more and more conspicuous *individuality* on the part of those who stand at the higher levels of thought. It is especially in these circumstances that exceptional individuals, instead of being deterred, should be encouraged to act differently from the mass. At other times there was no advantage in their doing so, unless they acted not only *differently* but *better*. In the present age the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service *·even* if the way of life it leads to is not *better than* than that of the mass but only *different from* it. Precisely because the tyranny of *·public·* opinion works so as to make eccentricity a *fault*, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. There has always been plenty of eccentricity when and where there has been plenty of strength of character; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount

of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage the society contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.

I have said that it is important to give the freest possible scope to •uncustomary things, so that in due course some of these may turn out to be fit to be converted into •customs. But independence of action and disregard of custom don't deserve encouragement only because they may lead to better ways of action and customs more worthy of general adoption; and people of decided mental superiority are not the only ones with a just claim to carry on their lives in their own way. There is no reason why all human lives should be constructed on some one pattern or some small number of patterns. If a person has even a moderate amount of common sense and experience, his own way of planning his way of life is the best, not because it is the best in itself but because it is *his own way*. Human beings are not like sheep; and even sheep aren't indistinguishably alike. A man can't get a coat or a pair of boots to fit him unless they are either made to his measure or he has a whole warehouse full of coats or boots to choose from. Well, is it easier to fit him with a *life* than with a *coat*? Are human beings more like one another in their whole physical and spiritual make-up than in the shape of their feet? If it were only that people differ in their *tastes*, that would be reason enough for not trying to fit them all into one mould. But different people also need different conditions for their spiritual development; they can't all exist healthily in the same •moral atmosphere and climate any more than all plants can flourish in the same •physical climate. The very things that help one person to develop his higher nature hinder another from doing so. A way of life that is a healthy excitement to one person, keeping all his faculties of action and enjoyment in their best order, is to another a distracting burden that suspends or crushes

all his inner life. Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities to pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral forces, that unless there is a corresponding variety in their ways of life they won't get their fair share of happiness and won't rise to the mental, moral, and aesthetic level that they are naturally capable of. Why then should tolerance, as far as the public attitude is concerned, extend only to tastes and ways of life that *have* to be accepted because so many people have them? Nowhere (except in some monastic institutions) is diversity of taste *entirely* unrecognized: a person may without blame either like or dislike rowing, or smoking, or music, or athletic exercises, or chess, or cards, or study, because those who like each of these things are too numerous to suppress, and so are those who dislike them. But the man—and still more the woman—who can be accused either of doing 'what nobody does' or of not doing 'what everybody does' is criticized as much as if he or she had committed some serious moral offence. You need to have a title, or some other badge of rank or of support from people of rank, if you're to be able to indulge somewhat in the luxury of doing as you like without harm to your reputation. To indulge *somewhat*, I repeat; for someone who allows himself *much* of that indulgence—that permission to differ—runs the risk of something worse than verbal criticism; they are in danger of being committed as lunatics and of having their property taken from them and given to their relations. [At this point Mill has a long footnote which is here raised into the main text.]

START OF THE LONG FOOTNOTE

There is something both contemptible and frightful in the sort of evidence on the basis of which, in recent years, any person can be judicially declared unfit to manage his affairs; and after his death his will can be set aside (if his estate is large

enough to pay the expenses of litigation—which are charged against the estate). All the minute details of his daily life are pried into, and if something is found that looks even slightly out of the ordinary, as seen through the medium of the perceiving and describing faculties of the lowest of the low, it is laid before the jury as evidence of insanity. This move often meets with success, because the jurors are little if at all less vulgar and ignorant than the witnesses, while the judges, with that extraordinary ignorance of human nature and human life that continually astonishes us in English lawyers, often help to mislead them. These trials speak volumes about the state of feeling and opinion among ordinary uneducated people with regard to human liberty. So far from setting any value on individuality—so far from respecting the right of each individual to act (where others aren't concerned) in •the way that seems good to his own judgment and inclinations—judges and juries can't even conceive that a sane person could want •such freedom. In bygone days, when it was proposed to burn atheists, charitable people used to suggest putting them into a mad-house instead. It wouldn't be surprising to see this done *now*, with the doers applauding themselves for treating these unfortunates in such a humane and Christian manner instead of persecuting them on behalf of religion—while also silently deriving satisfaction from the atheists' getting what they deserve!

END OF FOOTNOTE

One characteristic of the present direction of public opinion is especially calculated to make it intolerant of any notable signs of individuality. The general average of mankind are moderate—•*middling*—not only in intellect but also in inclinations: they •haven't any tastes or wishes strong enough to incline them to do anything unusual, so they don't understand those who •have, and classify all such people with the wild and intemperate whom they are accustomed to

look down on. Combine this general fact with the supposition that a strong movement has started towards the improvement of morals, and it is obvious what we have to expect! Well, in these days such a movement *has* started: much has actually been brought about in the way of increased regularity of conduct and discouragement of excesses; and there is a widespread sense of •philanthropy—for the moral and prudential improvement of our fellow-creatures there is no more inviting field than •*that*. These tendencies of the times cause the public to be more disposed than at almost any earlier time to prescribe general rules of conduct and try to make everyone conform to the approved standard. And that standard—whether stated or silently understood—is *to desire nothing strongly*. Its ideal of character is to be without any notable character, to maim by *compression* (like a Chinese lady's foot) every part of human nature that stands out prominently, and tends to make the person noticeably dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity.

As usually happens with ideals that exclude half of what is desirable, the present standard for approval produces only an inferior imitation of the other half. Instead of

- great energies guided by •vigorous reason, and
- strong feelings strongly controlled by a •conscientious will,

its result is weak feelings and weak energies, and just because they are weak they can be kept in outward conformity to the rules without any strength either of will or of reason. . . . There is now scarcely any outlet for energy in this country except *business*. The energy expended in *that* may still be regarded as considerable. What little is left over from business is spent on some hobby—it may be a useful hobby, even a philanthropic one, but it is always some *one thing*, and generally a small thing. The greatness of England is now all collective: we are all individually small, and seem

to be capable of great things only through our habit of combining; and with this state of affairs our moral and religious philanthropists are perfectly contented. But it was men of a different type from this that made England what it has been, and men of a different type will be needed to prevent England's decline.

The despotism of custom is everywhere the permanent blockage to human advancement, because it never loses its hostility to the disposition to aim at something better than what is customary, a disposition that is called—depending on the circumstances—the spirit of •liberty, or the spirit of •progress or of •improvement. These three are not exactly the same, and I shall say a little about how they inter-relate. The spirit of improvement isn't always a spirit of liberty, for it may aim at forcing improvements on an unwilling people; and when the spirit of liberty resists such attempts it becomes, in that place and for a while, an ally of the opponents of 'improvement'. But the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since through liberty there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals. The progressive principle can be the love of liberty or the love of improvement; and either way it is antagonistic to the sway of custom, involving at least emancipation from *that* yoke; and what is of most interest in the history of mankind is this contest between improvement and custom. Most parts of the world have no *history* properly so-called, because in them the despotism of custom is complete. This is the case over the whole east. No-one there thinks of resisting the argument from custom, except perhaps some tyrant intoxicated with power. And we see the result. Those nations must once have had originality: they didn't spring up out of the ground populous, literate, and skilled in many of the arts of life; they *made themselves* like that, and at that time were the greatest and

most powerful nations in the world. What are they now? The subjects or dependents of •Europeans—tribes •whose forefathers wandered in the forests when *theirs* had magnificent palaces and gorgeous temples, but •who •subsequently had the good fortune that among them • custom shared its power with liberty and progress. It seems that a people may be progressive for a certain length of time and then stop. When does it stop? *When it ceases to possess individuality.* If a similar change comes over the nations of Europe, it won't have exactly the same shape •as in the east, because the despotism of custom with which the European nations are threatened is not precisely *stationariness*. It forbids singularity, but it doesn't rule out change, provided we all change together. We have discarded the fixed costumes of our forefathers; everyone must still dress like other people, but the fashion may change once or twice a year. In this way we take care that when there is change it is for the sake of change, and not from any idea of beauty or convenience; for the same idea of beauty or convenience would not strike all the world at the same moment and be simultaneously thrown aside by everyone at another moment, •and so to give any power to ideas of beauty or convenience would be a threat to uniformity. But we are progressive as well as changeable: we continually make new inventions in mechanical things, and keep them until they are superseded by something better; we are eager for improvement in politics, in education, even in morals, though our idea of moral improvement chiefly consists in persuading or forcing other people to be as good as *we* are. It isn't •progress that we object to; on the contrary, we flatter ourselves that we are the most progressive people who ever lived. It is •individuality that we war against: we would think we had done wonders if we had made ourselves all alike, forgetting that

one person's unlikeness to another is generally what first draws the attention of either of them to the imperfection of his own type and the superiority of the other, or the possibility of combining the advantages of both so as to produce something better than either.

We have a warning example in China—a nation of much talent, and even much wisdom in some respects. This is due to China's rare good fortune in having been provided at an early period with a particularly good set of customs that were partly the work of men to whom even the most enlightened European must grant the title of sages and philosophers (with certain limitations). The Chinese are remarkable, too, in the excellence of their apparatus for •implanting (as far as possible) the best wisdom they have in every mind in the community, and •seeing to it that those who have acquired the most of that wisdom occupy the positions of honour and power. Surely—you might think—the people who did this have discovered the secret of human progressiveness, and must have kept themselves steadily at the head of the movement of the world. On the contrary, they have become stationary—have remained so for thousands of years—and if they are ever to be further improved it must be by foreigners. They have succeeded beyond all hope in doing what English philanthropists are so industriously working at, namely making a people all alike, all governing their thoughts and conduct by the same maxims and rules; and these—the Chinese people of today—are the fruits of that success. The modern régime of public opinion is an unorganized version of what the Chinese educational and political systems have in an organized form; and unless individuality can successfully assert itself against this yoke, Europe, despite its noble antecedents and its professed Christianity, will tend to become another China.

What is it that has so far preserved Europe from this fate? What has made the European family of nations an •improving rather than a •stationary portion of mankind? It's not that they are more excellent than the Chinese; when excellence exists it is an effect of improvement, not a cause. Rather, it is the remarkable diversity of character and culture among the Europeans. Individuals, classes, and nations have been extremely unlike one another; they have set out on a great variety of paths, each leading to something valuable; and although at every period those who travelled in different paths have been intolerant of one another, and each would have thought it an excellent thing if all the rest could have been compelled to travel *his* road, their attempts to block each other's development have rarely had any permanent success, and each has in time had to put up with receiving the good which the others have offered! Europe's progressive and many-sided development is due, in my judgment, wholly to this plurality of paths. But it is already starting to have less of this benefit. It is decidedly advancing towards the Chinese 'ideal' of making all people alike. M. de Tocqueville, in his last important work, remarks how much more the Frenchmen of the present day resemble one another than did those even of the last generation. The same remark might be made of Englishmen in a far greater degree. In a passage I have already quoted, Wilhelm von Humboldt points out two things as required for human development because they are required to make people unlike one another—namely, •freedom and •variety of situations. The second of these is diminishing day by day in this country. The circumstances that surround different classes and individuals, and shape their characters, are daily becoming more assimilated to one another. Formerly, different ranks, neighbourhoods, trades, professions lived in what might be called different *worlds*; at present to a great degree they inhabit the same

world. Comparatively speaking, they now read the same things, listen to the same things, see the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights and liberties, and the same means of asserting them. Great as are the differences of position that remain, they are nothing compared with the differences that have gone. And the assimilation still goes on. All the political changes of the day promote it, since they all tend to raise the low and to lower the high. Every extension of education promotes it, because education brings people under common influences and gives them access to the general stock of facts and sentiments. Improvements in the means of communication promote it by bringing the inhabitants of distant places into personal contact, and keeping up a rapid flow of changes of residence between one place and another. The increase in commerce and manufacture promotes it by •spreading more widely the advantages of comfortable circumstances, and by •opening all objects of ambition—even the highest—to general competition, so that the desire to *rise* is no longer a mark of a particular class but of all classes. A force that is even more powerful than all these in bringing about a general similarity among mankind is the way public opinion, in this and other free countries, completely dominates the state. There used to be various social eminences which enabled persons entrenched on them to disregard the opinion of the multitude, but they have

gradually become levelled. The very idea of resisting the will of the public, when they are positively known to *have* a will, disappears more and more from the minds of practical politicians. So there stops being any social support for non-conformity—any substantive social power that is itself opposed to the dominance of numbers, and has a concern for taking under its protection opinions and tendencies that are at odds with those of the public.

The combination of all these causes forms so great a mass of influences hostile to •individuality that it is hard to see how •it can stand its ground. It will do so with increasing difficulty unless the intelligent part of the public can be made to feel its value—to see that it is *good* that there should be differences, even if not for the better, indeed even if it sometimes seems to them to be for the worse. If the claims of individuality are ever to be asserted, the time is *now*, when the enforced assimilation is still far from complete. It is only in the earlier stages that any defence can be successfully mounted against the attack. The demand that all other people shall resemble ourselves grows by what it feeds on. If there is no resistance until life is reduced *nearly* to one uniform type, all variations from that type will come to be considered impious, immoral, even monstrous and contrary to nature. When mankind spend some time without seeing diversity, they quickly become unable even to *conceive* it.

Chapter 4: The limits to the authority of society over the individual

What, then, is the rightful limit to the sovereignty of the individual over himself? Where does the authority of society begin? How much of human life should be assigned to individuality, and how much to society?

Each will receive its proper share if each has that which more particularly concerns it. To individuality should belong the part of life in which it is chiefly the individual that is interested; to society, the part which chiefly interests society. [Here and throughout, your being 'interested in' something means that your *interests* are involved in it; this is not 'interested in' as the opposite of 'bored by'.]

Though society is not founded on a contract, and though no good purpose is served by inventing a contract in order to infer social obligations from it, everyone who receives the protection of society owes society something in return for this benefit, and the sheer fact that they *have* a society makes it indispensable that each should be bound to conform to a certain line of conduct towards the rest. This conduct consists in two things.

(1) Not harming the interests of one another; or, rather, not harming certain particular interests which ought to be classified (by explicit law or tacit understanding) as *rights*.

(2) Doing one's share (to be fixed by some fair principle) of the labours and sacrifices incurred for defending the society or its members from injury and harassment.

Society is justified in enforcing these conditions at the expense of those who try to avoid fulfilling them. Nor is this all that society may do. The acts of an individual may be hurtful to others, or lacking in proper consideration for their welfare, without going so far as violating any of their

constituted rights. The offender may then be justly punished by opinion, though not by law. As soon as any part of a person's conduct has a negative effect on the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it, and the question whether or not the general welfare will be promoted by interfering with it becomes open to discussion. But there is no room for raising any such question when a person's conduct affects the interests of no-one but himself, or needn't affect others unless they want it to (all the persons concerned being adults with the ordinary amount of understanding). In all such cases there should be perfect freedom, legal and social, to perform the action and accept the consequences.

It would be a great misunderstanding of this doctrine to suppose that it is one of selfish indifference, claiming that human beings have no concern with each other's behaviour and shouldn't concern themselves about one another's well-doing or well-being unless their own interests are involved. Instead of any lessening there is need for a great *increase* of disinterested [= 'not *self*-interested'] effort to promote the good of others. But it is one thing to act on one's belief that it would be better for x himself if he didn't do y and another to bring legal or social pressure on him not to do y. For persuading people to look after themselves, disinterested benevolence can find instruments other than whips and scourges, whether of the literal or the metaphorical sort. I am the last person to undervalue the self-regarding virtues; they are second in importance only to the social virtues, if not first equal with them. It is equally the business of education to cultivate both. But even education works by conviction and persuasion as well as by compulsion; and once the period of education is past, it is *only* by conviction

and persuasion that the self-regarding virtues should be instilled into people. Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter. They should be forever stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties, and increased direction of their feelings and aims towards things and thoughts that are wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading. But no one person or group is entitled to say to another adult human being that he *shall not* do with his life for his own benefit what he chooses to do with it. He is the person most interested in his own well-being; except in cases of strong personal attachment, the interest that anyone else can have in it is trifling compared with his own; and society's interest in him as an individual (except with regard to his conduct toward others) is fractional and altogether indirect. And there is also a point about the *knowledge* on which interference would have to be based. The most ordinary man or woman has means of knowledge concerning his own feelings and circumstances that immeasurably surpass those that anyone else can have. The interference of society to overrule his judgment and purposes in what affects only himself must be based not on knowledge about him in particular but on *general* presumptions about people as a whole; these general presumptions may be altogether wrong, and even when they are right they are as likely as not to be misapplied to individual cases. (Remember that the application is being made to someone by *other* people, who therefore don't know much about the circumstances of the case). In this department of human affairs, therefore, individuality has its proper field of action. In the conduct of human beings towards one another, it is necessary that general rules should for the most part be observed so that people can know what to expect; but in each person's own concerns, his individual

spontaneity is entitled to free exercise. Considerations to aid his judgment, urgings to strengthen his will, may be offered to him, even pushed at him, by others; but *he* is the final judge. Any errors that he is likely to commit against advice and warning are far outweighed by the evil of allowing others to constrain him to what they think to be his good.

I don't mean that a person's self-regarding qualities or deficiencies oughtn't to affect how others regard him. That is neither possible nor desirable. If he is conspicuous in any of the qualities that conduce to his own good, he is to that extent a proper object of admiration. He is that much nearer to the ideal perfection of human nature. If he is grossly lacking in those qualities, a sentiment the opposite of admiration will follow. There is a degree of folly, and a degree of what may be called (though the phrase is somewhat objectionable) lowness or depravity of taste, which—though it can't justify harming the person who manifests it—makes him necessarily *and properly* the object of distaste and in extreme cases the object of contempt; anyone who has the opposite qualities in due strength would have to have these feelings. Though not doing wrong to anyone else, a person may so act as to compel us to *judge* him to be a fool or a being of some inferior kind, and to *feel* towards him in that way; and since this judgment and feeling are a fact that he would prefer to avoid, it is doing him a service to warn him of it beforehand, as it would be to warn him of any other disagreeable consequence to which he is exposing himself. It would indeed be a good thing if this service were given much more freely than the common notions of politeness at present permit, and if one person could honestly point out to another that he thinks him at fault, without being considered pushy or bad-mannered. We also have a right in various ways to act on our unfavourable opinion of anyone, not oppressing his individuality but exercising ours. We are

not bound, for example, to seek his society; we have a right to avoid it (though not to parade the avoidance), for we have a right to choose the society most acceptable to us. We have a right—and possibly even a duty—to warn others against him if we think his example or conversation likely to have a bad effect on those with whom he associates. When we have at our disposal various possibilities of giving help, we may give others the preference over him unless it is a question of helping him to improve. In these different ways a person may suffer very severe penalties at the hands of others for faults that directly concern only himself; but he suffers these penalties only as natural and spontaneous consequences of the faults themselves, not because they are purposely inflicted on him for the sake of punishment. A person who

shows rashness, obstinacy, self-conceit,
can't live within moderate means,

can't restrain himself from hurtful indulgences, and
pursues animal pleasures at the expense of those of
feeling and intellect,

must expect to be lowered in the opinion of others, and to have a smaller share of their favourable sentiments; has no right to complain of this unless he has deserved their favour by special excellence in his social relations, thus establishing a right to help from them—a right that isn't affected by how badly he treats himself.

What I contend for is this: with regard to the part of someone's conduct and character that concerns his own good but doesn't affect the interests of others in their relations with him, the only inconveniences that he should be subject to are ones that are strictly inseparable from the unfavourable judgment of others. Acts injurious to others require a totally different treatment. Encroachment on the rights of other, infliction on them of any loss or damage not justified by his own rights, falsehood or trickery in dealing with them, unfair

or ungenerous use of advantages over them, even selfish abstinence from defending them against harm—these are fit objects of moral reproach and, in serious cases, of moral retribution and punishment. And not only these •acts but also the •dispositions that lead to them are strictly immoral, and are fit objects of disapproval that may rise to the level of disgust.

Cruelty of disposition, malice and ill-nature, envy (that most anti-social and odious of all passions), hypocrisy and insincerity, irritability over trifles, immoderate resentment, the love of domineering over others, the desire to gather in more than one's share of advantages, the pride that is pleased when others fail, the egotism that thinks self and its concerns more important than everything else and decides all doubtful questions in his own favour

—these are moral vices, and constitute a bad and odious moral character. Not so the self-regarding faults previously mentioned: they are not strictly immoralities, and don't constitute wickedness however intense they are. They may be proofs of any amount of folly or lack of personal dignity and self-respect; but they invite moral condemnation only when they involve a breach of duty to others for whose sake the individual is obliged to take care of himself. What are called duties to ourselves are not socially obligatory unless circumstances turn them into duties to others as well. The phrase 'duty to oneself', when it means anything more than *prudence*, means self-respect or self-development; and there is no 'it's-for-the-good-of-mankind' reason why anyone should be held accountable to his fellow-creatures for either of them.

The distinction between •the loss of regard that a person may rightly incur through a lack of prudence or of personal dignity and •the condemnation that is due to him for an

offence against the rights of others, is not a merely verbal one. It makes a vast difference both in our feelings and in our conduct towards him, whether he displeases us in •things in which we think we *have* a right to control him, or displeases us in •things in which we know we *haven't*. If he displeases us, we may express our distaste, and we may keep our distance from a *person* as well as from a *thing* that displeases us; but we shan't therefore feel called on to make his life uncomfortable. We shall reflect that he already bears, or will bear, the whole penalty of his error. If he spoils his life by mismanagement, that won't lead us to want to spoil it still further: instead of wishing to punish him, we'll try to lighten his punishment, by showing him how to avoid or cure the evils that his conduct tends to bring on him. He may be to us an object of •pity, perhaps of •dislike, but not of •anger or •resentment; we shan't treat him like an enemy of society; the worst we shall think ourselves justified in doing is leaving him to himself, if we don't interfere benevolently by showing interest or concern for him. The situation is entire different if he has infringed the rules necessary for the protection of his fellow-creatures, individually or collectively. The evil consequences of his acts don't then fall on himself but on others; and society, as the protector of all its members, must strike back at him, inflicting pain on him for the express purpose of punishment, and must take care that the pain is sufficiently severe. In this •latter case he is an offender in our court, and we are called on not only to sit in judgment on him but, in one way or another, to carry out our own sentence; whereas in the •former case it is not our role to inflict any suffering on him except what may incidentally follow from our using the same liberty in the regulation of our own affairs that we allow him in his.

Many people will deny that we can distinguish the part of

a person's life that concerns only himself from the part that concerns others. They may say:

How can any part of the conduct of a member of society be a matter of indifference to the other members? No person is an entirely isolated being; it is impossible for a person to do anything seriously or permanently hurtful to himself without harm coming at least to those closely connected with him and often far beyond them. If he injures his property, he does harm to those who directly or indirectly derived support from it, and usually lessens somewhat the general resources of the community. If he worsens his physical or mental abilities, he not only brings evil on all who depended on him for any portion of their happiness but makes himself unable to render the services that he owes to his fellow-creatures generally; perhaps becomes a burden on their affection or benevolence. . . .

Finally, if by his vices or follies a person does no direct harm to others, he nevertheless does do harm by the example he sets, and he ought to be compelled to control himself, for the sake of those whom the sight or knowledge of his conduct might corrupt or mislead.

And even if the consequences of misconduct could be confined to the vicious or thoughtless individual himself, ought society to abandon to their own guidance those who are manifestly unfit for it? We all agree that children and young people should be protected against themselves; so isn't society equally bound to protect against themselves adults who are equally incapable of self-government? If gambling, or drunkenness, or sexual licence, or idleness, or uncleanness, are as injurious to happiness and as great a hindrance to improvement as many or most

of the acts prohibited by law, why shouldn't the law try to put *them* down also (as far as practicability and social convenience allow)? And as a supplement to the unavoidable imperfections of law, oughtn't *public opinion* at least to organize a powerful guard against these vices, and rigorously apply social penalties on those who are known to practise them? There is no question here of restricting individuality or blocking trials of new and original experiments in living. Nothing is being prevented except things that have been tried and condemned from the beginning of the world until now—things that experience has shown not to be useful or suitable to any person's individuality. There must be *some* length of time and amount of experience after which a moral or prudential truth can be regarded as established! All that is proposed here is to prevent generation after generation from falling over the same precipice that has been fatal to their predecessors.

I fully admit that the harm a person does to himself may seriously affect (both through their sympathies and their interests) those closely connected with him, and may in a lesser degree affect society in general. When by conduct of this sort a person is led to violate a distinct and assignable obligation to one or more others, the case is no longer in self-regarding category and becomes amenable to *moral* condemnation in the proper sense of the term. [By an 'assignable' obligation, Mill means an obligation to someone in particular, as distinct from (say) an obligation to keep yourself fit in case *someone or other* comes to need your help. More of this at the start of the next paragraph.] For example: if through intemperance or extravagance a man becomes unable to pay his debts, or unable to support and educate his family, he is deservedly condemned and might be justly punished; but it is for the breach of duty

to his family or creditors, not for the extravagance. If the resources that ought to have been devoted to them had been diverted from them for the most prudent investment, the moral culpability would have been the same. . . . Again, if (as often happens) a man causes grief to his family •by his addiction to bad habits, he deserves reproach for his unkindness or ingratitude; but he may deserve it just as much if he causes grief to his family •by cultivating habits that are not in themselves vicious. Someone who

fails in the consideration generally due to the interests and feelings of others, without •being compelled by some more imperative duty or •justified by allowable self-preference,

is a subject of moral disapproval for that failure, but not for •the cause of it and not for •any errors that are merely personal to himself and may have indirectly led to it. Similarly, when a person disables himself through purely self-regarding conduct from the performance of some definite duty he has towards the public, he is guilty of a social offence. No-one ought to be punished simply for being drunk, but a soldier or a policeman should be punished for being drunk on duty. In short, whenever there is definite damage, or a definite risk of damage, either to an individual or to the public, the case is taken out of the domain of liberty and placed in that of morality or law.

But with regard to the merely contingent. . . .harm that a person causes to society by conduct that doesn't violate any specific duty to the public or bring harm to any assignable individual except himself: this inconvenience is one that society can afford to bear for the sake of the greater good of human freedom. If adults are to be punished for not taking proper care of themselves, I would rather it were done for their own sake than done on the grounds that we are preventing them from impairing their ability to render to

society benefits that society doesn't claim it has a right to demand! But I can't consent to argue the point as if society had no means of bringing its weaker members up to its ordinary standard of rational conduct, except waiting till they do something irrational and then punishing them—legally or morally—for it. Society has had absolute power over them during all the early part of their existence; it has had the whole period of childhood and teen-age in which to try to make them capable of rational conduct in life. The existing adult generation is master both of the training and the entire circumstances of the generation to come. Indeed it can't make them perfectly wise and good, because it is itself so lamentably short of goodness and wisdom; and its best efforts are not always, in individual cases, its most successful ones; but it is perfectly well able to make the rising generation, as a whole, as good as itself and a little better. If society lets any considerable number of its members grow up as mere children, incapable of being acted on by rational consideration of long-term consequences, society has itself to blame for the upshot. Armed not only with all the powers of education but also with the dominance that the authority of a publicly accepted opinion always exercises over the minds of those who are least fitted to judge for themselves; and aided by the natural penalties that can't be prevented from falling on those who incur the distaste or the contempt of those who know them; let society not claim that besides all this it needs the power to issue commands and enforce obedience in the personal concerns of individuals—concerns in which, on all principles of justice and policy, the decision ought to rest with those who will have to put up with the consequences. And nothing tends more to discredit and frustrate the better means of influencing conduct than a resort to the worse. If those whom we are trying to coerce into prudence or temperance include any who are made

of the same stuff as vigorous and independent characters, they will certainly rebel against the yoke. No such person will ever feel that others have a right to control him in his concerns—the kind of right that they do have to prevent him from harming them in their concerns; and it easily comes to be considered a mark of spirit and courage to fly in the face of such illegitimate authority, ostentatiously doing the exact opposite of what it commands. An example was the fashion of grossness that followed, in the time of Charles II, the fanatical moral intolerance of the puritans. With respect to what is said about the need to protect society from the bad example set for others by the vicious or the self-indulgent: it is true that a bad example may have a pernicious effect, especially the example of doing wrong to others with impunity to the wrong-doer. But we are now speaking of conduct which, while doing no wrong to others, is supposed to do great harm to the agent himself; and I don't see how those who believe this can help thinking that the example must on the whole do more good than harm, because in displaying the misconduct it also displays the painful or degrading consequences which . . . are supposed nearly always to flow from it.

But the strongest of all the arguments against the public's interfering with purely personal conduct is that when it does interfere the odds are that it interferes wrongly and in the wrong place. On questions of social morality—of duty to others—the opinion of the overruling majority is likely to be right oftener than it is wrong, because on such questions they are only required to judge how a given mode of conduct, if allowed to be practised, would affect their interests. But the opinion of a similar majority imposed as a law on the minority on questions of self-regarding conduct is quite as likely to be wrong as right; for in these cases public opinion means at best some people's opinion of what is good or bad

for *other* people; while very often it doesn't even mean that, because the public consider only their own preference and don't pay the slightest regard to the pleasure or convenience of those whose conduct they censure. There are many who regard any conduct that they have a distaste for as an insult to themselves, and resent it as an outrage to their feelings; as a religious bigot, when accused of disregarding the religious feelings of others, has been known to reply that *they* disregard *his* feelings by persisting in their abominable worship or creed! But •a person's feeling for his own opinion is not on a par with •the feeling of someone else who is offended at his holding it; any more than •a person's desire to keep his purse is on a par with •a thief's desire to take it. Someone's *taste* is as much his own particular concern as is his opinion or his purse. It is easy for anyone to imagine an ideal public which leaves individuals free to choose in all matters where there are two sides to the question, and only requires them to abstain from kinds of conduct that •universal experience has condemned. But whoever saw a public that *did* set any such limit to its censorship? and when does the public trouble itself about •universal experience? In its interferences with personal conduct the public is seldom thinking of anything but the dreadfulness of anyone's acting or feeling *differently from itself*; and this standard of judgment is what ninety percent of all moralists and moral theorists hold up to mankind as the dictate of religion and philosophy. The standard in question is thinly disguised in the hands of these people. What they openly teach is that things are right because they are right—because we feel them to be so. They tell us to search in our own minds and hearts for laws of conduct binding on ourselves and on all others. What can the poor public do but apply these instructions and make their own personal feelings of good and evil, if they are reasonably unanimous in them,

obligatory on all the world?

The evil that I am pointing out here isn't one that exists only in theory; and you may expect me to cite examples in which the public of this age and country improperly dresses up its own preferences as moral laws. I am not writing an essay on the aberrations of existing moral feeling, which is too weighty a subject to be discussed parenthetically and by way of illustration. But I do need to provide some examples, to show that the principle I maintain is of serious and practical significance, and that I am not trying to set up a barrier against imaginary evils. And it isn't hard to show by abundant examples that one of the most universal of all human tendencies is the tendency to extend the bounds of what may be called 'moral police' until it encroaches on the most unquestionably legitimate liberty of the individual. Examples of this will occupy the remainder of the present chapter.

As a first instance, consider the hostilities that men feel on no better grounds than that persons whose religious opinions are different from theirs don't practise *their* religious observances, especially their religious abstinences. To cite a rather trivial example, nothing in the creed or practice of Christians does more to make Moslems hate them than the fact of their eating pork. There are few acts that Christians and Europeans regard with more sincere disgust than Moslems regard this particular way of satisfying hunger. It is in the first place an offence against their religion; but *this* doesn't explain either the degree or the kind of their repugnance; for wine also is forbidden by their religion, and Moslems all think it is wrong to drink wine, but they don't think it is disgusting. In contrast with that, their aversion to the flesh of the 'unclean beast' has that special character—like an *instinctive* revulsion—which the idea of uncleanness, when once it thoroughly sinks into

the feelings, seems always to excite even in those whose personal habits are anything but scrupulously clean. A remarkable example of this force of the idea of uncleanness is provided by the sentiment of religious impurity that is so intense in the Hindus. Suppose now that in a people of whom the majority were Moslems, that majority were to insist on not permitting pork to be eaten within the limits of the country. This would be nothing new in Moslem countries.³ Would it be a legitimate exercise of the moral authority of public opinion? and if not, why not? The practice is really revolting to such a public. They also sincerely think that it is forbidden and abhorred by God. Neither could the prohibition be censured as religious persecution. It might be religious in its origin, but it wouldn't be persecution for religion, since nobody's religion makes it a duty to eat pork. The only tenable ground for condemning it would be that the public has no business interfering with the personal tastes and self-regarding concerns of individuals.

To come somewhat nearer home: the majority of Spaniards consider it a gross impiety, offensive in the highest degree to the supreme being, to worship him in any but the Roman Catholic way; and no other public worship is lawful on Spanish soil. The people of all Southern Europe look on a married clergy as not only irreligious, but unchaste, indecent, gross, disgusting. What do protestants think of these perfectly sincere feelings, and of the attempt to enforce them against non-Catholics? Yet, if mankind are justified in interfering with each other's liberty in things that

don't concern the interests of others, on what principle is it possible consistently to exclude these cases? or who can blame people for wanting to suppress what they regard as a scandal in the sight of God and man?

No stronger case can be shown for prohibiting anything that is regarded as a personal immorality than is made out for suppressing these practices in the eyes of those who regard them as impieties; and unless we are willing to adopt the logic of persecutors, and to say that •we may persecute others because we are right and that •they must not persecute us because they are wrong, we must beware of admitting a principle whose application to *ourselves* we would resent as a gross injustice.

Those examples may be objected to, although unreasonably, as drawn from situations that couldn't arise among *us*, because in this country public opinion isn't likely to enforce abstinence from meats, or to interfere with people for worshipping, and for either marrying or not marrying, according to their creed or inclination. My next example, however, will involve an interference with liberty that we have by no means passed all danger of. Wherever the puritans have been sufficiently powerful, as in New England and in Great Britain at the time of Cromwell they have tried with considerable success to put down all public amusements and nearly all private ones—especially music, dancing, public games and other gatherings for purposes of amusement, and the theatre. In this country there are still many people whose notions of morality and religion condemn these recreations; and

³ The case of the Bombay Parsis is an interesting example of this. This industrious and enterprising tribe, the descendants of the Persian fire-worshippers, fled from their native country to escape the Caliphs; when they arrived in western India they were tolerated by the Hindu sovereigns on condition that they gave up eating beef. When those regions afterwards fell under the dominion of Moslem conquerors, the Parsis obtained from them a continuing tolerance on condition that they gave up eating pork. What was at first •obedience to authority became a •second nature, and the Parsis to this day abstain both from beef and pork. Though not required by their religion, this double abstinence has had time to grow into a custom of their tribe; and in the east custom is a religion.

those people belong chiefly to the middle class, which is the dominant power in the present social and political condition of the kingdom, so that it is by no means impossible that people with these views may some day command a majority in parliament. How will the rest of the community like having the amusements that shall be permitted to them regulated by the religious and moral sentiments of the stricter Calvinists and Methodists? Wouldn't they pretty abruptly tell these intrusively pious members of society to mind their own business? Well, that is *precisely* what should be said to every government and every public who claim that no person shall enjoy any pleasure that *they* think is wrong. Once the principle of that claim is admitted, no-one can reasonably object to its being acted on in the spirit of the majority, or of other dominant power in the country; and everyone must be ready to conform to the idea of a Christian commonwealth as understood by the early settlers in New England, if a religious creed similar to theirs should ever succeed in regaining its lost ground. And religions supposed to be declining often *have* regained lost ground!

Here is another possibility, perhaps more likely to come about than the one last mentioned. We all know that there is a strong tendency in the modern world towards a democratic constitution of society, whether or not accompanied by democratic political institutions. Let us then look at the United States, the country where this tendency is most completely realized—the country where both society and the government are most democratic. It is said that *there* the feeling of the majority, who find disagreeable any appearance of a more showy or costly style of living than they can hope to rival, operates as a fairly effective expense-controlling law, and that in many parts of the Union it is really difficult for a person with a very large income to find any way of spending it without being disapproved of by the people. This is *said*, and

no doubt it is a much exaggerated account of the real facts; but the state of things it portrays is not only conceivable and possible, but is a probable result of •democratic feeling combined with •the notion that the public has a right of veto over how individuals shall spend their incomes. Add to those two the supposition of •a considerable spreading of socialist opinions, and it may become abominable in the eyes of the majority to possess more than a very little property or to have any income not earned by manual labour. Opinions similar in principle to these already prevail widely among the artisan class [= 'the class of skilled manual workers'], and weigh oppressively on those who are especially vulnerable to the opinion of that class, namely its own members. It is known that the bad workmen who form the majority of the workers in many branches of industry are firmly of opinion that bad workmen ought to receive the same wages as good ones, and that those who have superior skill or work harder ought not to be allowed to earn more than those who haven't and don't. And they employ a moral police which occasionally becomes a physical one [meaning: they use moral bullying and sometimes physical force] to deter skillful workmen from receiving and employers from giving more pay for more useful service. If the public have any jurisdiction over private concerns, I can't see that these people are at fault, or that any individual's particular public can be blamed for asserting the same authority over his individual conduct as the general public asserts over people in general.

But setting aside suppositious cases, in our own day •gross intrusions on the liberty of private life are actually practised, •still greater ones are threatened with some expectation of success, and •opinions are presented that would give to the public an unlimited right not only to prohibit by law everything that it thinks wrong, but also, in order to *get at* what it thinks wrong, to prohibit any number of things

that it admits to be innocent.

Under the name of 'preventing intemperance' the people of one English colony and of nearly half the United States have been forbidden by law from making any use whatever of alcoholic drinks, except for medical purposes. [This refers to the so-called 'Maine Law' of 1815.] Prohibition of their *sale*, which is what is explicitly forbidden by law, is and is intended to be prohibition of their *use*. And though the impracticability of enforcing the law has caused its repeal in several of the states that had adopted it, including the one from which it derives its name, an attempt has nevertheless been started, and is pushed with considerable zeal by many of the professed philanthropists, to agitate for a similar law in this country. The association (or 'Alliance' as it terms itself) which has been formed for this purpose has acquired some notoriety through the publicity given to a correspondence between its Secretary and one of the very few English public men who hold that a politician's opinions ought to be founded on principles. Lord Stanley's part in this correspondence should strengthen the hopes already built on him, by those who know how few of those who figure in political life have such qualities as are shown in some of his public appearances. The spokesman for the Alliance, who would 'deeply deplore the recognition of any principle that could be wrenched around so as to justify bigotry and persecution', points out the 'broad and impassable barrier' that divides such principles from those of his association. 'All

matters relating to thought, opinion, conscience appear to me', he says, 'to lie outside the sphere of legislation; all

matters pertaining to social acts and habits. . . . appear to me to be within that sphere.' He doesn't mention a third class, different from either of these, namely acts and habits that are not social but individual;

although it is to *this* class, surely, that the act of drinking alcoholic liquors belongs. Selling such liquors, however, is trading, and trading is a social act. But the infringement complained of is not on the liberty of the seller but on that of the buyer and consumer; since the state might just as well •forbid him to drink wine as •purposely make it impossible for him to obtain it. The Secretary of the Alliance, however, says: 'I claim as a citizen a right to legislate whenever my social rights are invaded by the social act of another.' Now for the definition of these 'social rights'.

'If anything invades my social rights, certainly the traffic in strong drink does. It destroys my primary right of security by constantly creating and stimulating social disorder. It invades my right of equality by making a profit out of the creation of misery that I am taxed to support. It impedes my right to free moral and intellectual development by surrounding my path with dangers and by weakening and demoralizing society, from which I have a right to claim mutual aid and personal relationships.'

This is a theory of 'social rights' the like of which has probably never before been stated clearly! It is nothing short of this: that it is my absolute social right that every *other* individual shall act in every respect exactly as he ought; that whoever fails in the least detail of this violates my social right and entitles me to demand that the legislature remove the grievance. So monstrous a •principle is far more dangerous than any •single interference with liberty; there is no violation of liberty that it wouldn't justify; it acknowledges no right to any freedom whatever, except perhaps the freedom to hold opinions in secret without ever disclosing them; for the moment an opinion that *I* consider poisonous passes anyone's lips it invades all the 'social rights' attributed to *me* by the Alliance. The doctrine ascribes to all mankind a

vested interest in each other's moral, intellectual, and even physical perfection, to be defined by each claimant according to his own standard.

Another important example of illegitimate interference with the rightful liberty of the individual, not simply threatened but long since carried into triumphant effect, is legislation concerning the sabbath. Refraining from one's usual daily occupations on one day of the week, as far as is practically possible, is no doubt a highly beneficial custom, though it is in no respect religiously binding on any except Jews. And it can't be followed without a general consent to that effect among the classes of people with jobs to do, because if some people follow it, that compels others to do so. It may therefore be allowable and right that the law should guarantee to each person the observance *by others* of the custom in question, by suspending the large-scale operations of the economy on a particular day. But this justification is based on the direct interest that *others* have in each individual's observance of the practice; so it doesn't apply to the leisure-time occupations that a person chooses to engage in; nor does it hold good, in the slightest degree, for legal restrictions on amusements. It is true that the amusement of some is the day's work of others; but the labour of a few is compensated for by the •pleasure of the many (and by the •good their recreation does for them), provided that the few freely choose their work and are free to give it up. The workers are perfectly right in thinking that if everyone worked on Sunday, seven days' work would have to be given for six days' wages: but so long as the great mass of employments are suspended, the small number who must still work for the enjoyment of others obtain a proportional increase of earnings; and they aren't obliged to follow those occupations if they would rather have leisure than pay. If a further remedy is sought, it might be found in

the establishment by custom of a holiday on some other day of the week for those particular classes of persons. So the only ground on which restrictions on Sunday amusements can be defended must be that they are religiously wrong; and this is a motive of legislation that never can be too earnestly protested against. 'Injuries to the gods are the gods' business' [Tacitus; Mill gives it in Latin]. It remains to be proved that society or anyone acting for it has been appointed by heaven to avenge any supposed offence to God that isn't also a wrong to our fellow-creatures. The notion that *it is one man's duty that another should be religious* was the basis for all the religious persecutions ever perpetrated, and if it were right it would fully justify them. The feeling that breaks out in the repeated attempts to stop railway travel on Sunday, in the resistance to the opening of museums, and the like, doesn't have the *cruelty* of •the persecutors of old, but the state of mind indicated by it is fundamentally the same as •theirs. It is a determination not to tolerate others in doing what is permitted by their religion, because it isn't permitted by the persecutor's religion. It is a belief that God not only abominates the act of the misbeliever but will blame *us* if we don't interfere with him.

To these examples of the small regard that is commonly paid to human liberty, I can't help adding one more: the language of downright persecution that breaks out from the press of this country whenever it feels called on to say something about the remarkable phenomenon of Mormonism. Much might be said concerning the unexpected and instructive fact that

an alleged new revelation and a religion based on it, the product of obvious fraud and not even supported by the prestige of extraordinary qualities in its founder, is believed by hundreds of thousands of people and has been made the foundation of a •whole• society—in

the age of newspapers, railways, and the electric telegraph!

What here concerns us is that this religion, like other and better ones, has its martyrs; that its prophet and founder was, for his teaching, put to death by a mob; that others of its adherents lost their lives by the same lawless violence; that they were forcibly expelled, in a body, from the territory in which they first grew up; and now that they have been chased into a solitary recess in the middle of a desert, many in this country openly declare that it would be •right (though not •convenient) to send an expedition against them to compel them by force to conform to the opinions of other people. The item in the Mormon doctrine that chiefly arouses the hostility that thus breaks through the ordinary restraints of religious tolerance is its acceptance of *polygamy*. Though permitted to Moslems, Hindus, and Chinese, this seems to arouse unquenchable animosity when practised by people who speak English and claim to be some kind of Christian. No-one disapproves of this Mormon institution ·of polygamy· more deeply than I do. Far from being in any way countenanced by the principle of liberty, it is a direct infraction of that principle, being a mere riveting of the chains of one half of the community, while freeing the other half from having an obligation running the other way; and there are other reasons against it also. Still, it must be remembered that this relation is as much voluntary on the part of the women concerned in it (who may be regarded as its victims) as is the case with any other form of the marriage institution. This may seem surprising, but it has its explanation in the common ideas and customs of the world, which teach women to think of marriage as the one thing they need. That makes it intelligible that many a woman should prefer being one of several wives to not being a wife at all. Other countries are not asked to recognize such unions, or to release any portion

of their inhabitants from their own laws on the grounds that they have Mormon beliefs. But when the dissentients—the Mormons—have

- conceded to the hostile attitudes of others far more than those others were entitled to demand,

and when they have

- left the territories where their doctrines were unacceptable, and settled in a remote corner of the earth that they have been the first to make habitable to human beings,

it's hard to see on what principles but those of *tyranny* they can be prevented from living there under what laws they please, provided they commit no aggression against other nations and allow perfect freedom of departure to those who are dissatisfied with their ways. A recent writer who is in some respects a person of considerable merit proposes not a *crusade* but what he calls a *civilizade* [a war in the service not of the cross but of civilisation] against this polygamous community, to put an end to what seems to him a step backwards in civilization. To me too that is what it seems to be, but I'm not aware that any community has the right to force another to be civilized. As long as those who suffer through the bad law don't call for help from other communities, I can't accept that persons entirely unconnected with them ought to step in and require that a condition of things with which all who are directly involved appear to be satisfied should be put an end to because it scandalizes people some thousands of miles away, people who have no part or concern in it. Let them send missionaries, if they please, to preach against it; and let them, by any fair means (of which silencing the teachers is not one) oppose the progress of similar doctrines among their own people. If civilization has gained the upper hand over barbarism when barbarism had the world to itself, it is absurd to claim to be afraid that barbarism, after having

been fairly put down, might revive and conquer civilization. A civilization that could thus be beaten by its vanquished enemy must already have become so degenerate that neither its appointed priests and teachers nor anybody else is able to stand up for it—or anybody will take the trouble to do so.

In *that* case, the sooner such a civilization receives notice to quit, the better! It can only go on from bad to worse until it is destroyed and regenerated (like the western part of the Roman Empire) by energetic barbarians.

Chapter 5: Applications

One would like the principles asserted in these pages to be applied consistently across all the various branches of government and morals; but there is no chance of doing that fruitfully until the principles have become more generally accepted, so that they can be the basis for a discussion of the relevant details. The few remarks I shall make on questions of detail are meant to •illustrate the principles rather than to •follow them out to their consequences. What I shall be offering are not so much •applications as •specimens of application [= ‘examples of how to go about applying’ the principles]. They may serve to clarify the meaning and the limits of the two maxims that together form the entire doctrine of this work, and to assist the judgment in holding the balance between them in the cases where it appears doubtful which of them is applicable to the case.

The principles in question are these two:

(1) The individual is not accountable to society for his actions insofar as these concern the interests of no-one but himself.

Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance by other people, if they think it necessary for the individual’s own good, are the only measures by which society can justifiably

express its dislike or disapproval of his conduct.

(2) The individual is accountable for such of his actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, and he may be subjected either to social or to legal punishments if society thinks that one or the other is needed for its protection.

The first point to be made is this: Just because damage (or the probability of damage) to the interests of others is the *only* thing that can justify the interference of society, it doesn’t follow that it *always* justifies such interference. In many cases an individual in pursuing a legitimate object necessarily (and therefore legitimately) causes pain or loss to others, or gets for himself a good that someone else had had a reasonable hope of obtaining. Such oppositions of interest between individuals often arise from bad social institutions, and are unavoidable while those institutions last; others would be unavoidable under any institutions. Anyone who succeeds in an overcrowded profession or in a competitive examination—more generally, someone who comes ahead of someone else in *any* contest for something that they both want—derives benefit from his competitor’s loss, wasted effort, and disappointment. But we all agree that it is better

for the general interest of mankind that people should pursue their objectives undeterred by consequences of this sort. In other words, society doesn't grant disappointed competitors any legal or moral right to immunity from *this* kind of suffering; and feels called on to interfere in competitive situations only when someone has succeeded through •means that it is contrary to the general interest to permit—namely •fraud, treachery, or force.

•Free trade•

Again, trade is a social act. Someone who undertakes to sell goods of any kind to the public is doing something that affects the interests of other people and of society in general; and so his conduct does *in principle* come within the jurisdiction of society; which is why it used to be thought the duty of governments, in all cases that were thought important, to fix prices and regulate the processes of manufacture. But it is now recognized, though only after a long struggle, that the best way to get good products at low prices is to leave the producers and sellers perfectly free, as long as the buyers are free to get their supplies from elsewhere. This is the so-called doctrine of Free Trade. The case for it is different from the case for the principle of individual liberty defended here, but it is just as solid. Restrictions on trade, or on production for purposes of trade, are indeed restraints; and restraint *as such* is always bad; but the restraints on trade that are in question here affect only that part of conduct that society is in principle entitled to restrain, and they are wrong purely because they don't really produce the results they are meant to produce. So the principle of individual liberty is not involved in the doctrine of Free Trade itself, nor does it come into most of the •questions that arise concerning the limits of that doctrine: for example, •how much public

control is admissible to prevent fraud by adulteration; •how far sanitary precautions, or arrangements to protect people working in dangerous occupations, should be enforced on employers. Questions like these involve the liberty issue only in a marginal way, through the general thesis that

leaving people to themselves is always better, other things being equal, than controlling them.

It can't be denied that people may be legitimately controlled for ends such as the ones I have just mentioned. On the other hand, *some* questions relating to interference with trade are centrally questions of liberty; such as

the Maine Law mentioned above on page 58,
the prohibition on importing opium into China,
the restriction of the sale of poisons;

all cases—in short, where the object of the interference is to make it hard or impossible to obtain a particular commodity. These interferences are objectionable as infringements on the liberty not of the producer or seller but of the buyer.

•Selling poisons•

One of these examples, that of the sale of poisons, raises a new question—the question of what the proper limits are of what may be called the functions of police. [As used here by Mill, 'police' covers any activities that are concerned with watching over society or some part of it, aiming to stop bad things—not just crimes—from happening.] How far can liberty legitimately be invaded for the prevention of crime or of accidents? It is one of the undisputed functions of government to take •precautions against crime before it has been committed, as well as to •detect and punish it afterwards. The preventive function of government, however, is far more liable to be abused at the expense of liberty than is its punitive function; for almost every part of the legitimate freedom of action of a human

being could be represented, and fairly too, as increasing the facilities for *some* kind of misconduct. (Someone earns his living making hammers; now think about the crimes that can be committed using a hammer!) Still, if a public authority or even a private person sees someone evidently preparing to commit a crime, they aren't bound to stay out of it until the crime is committed, but may interfere to prevent it. If poisons were never bought or used for any purpose except •to commit murder, it would be right to prohibit their manufacture and sale. In fact, however, they may be wanted for •purposes that are not only innocent but useful, and restrictions can't be imposed in •one case without operating also in •the other. Again, it is a proper part of the duty of public authority to guard against accidents. If either a public officer or anyone else saw a person starting to cross a bridge that was known to be unsafe, and there was no time to warn him of his danger, they might seize him and pull him back without any real infringement of his liberty; for liberty consists in doing what one desires, and he doesn't desire to fall into the river. Nevertheless, when there is not a certainty of trouble but only a risk of it, no-one but the person himself can judge whether in this case he has a strong enough motive to make it worthwhile to run the risk; and so I think he ought only to be warned of the danger, not forcibly prevented from exposing himself to it. (This doesn't apply if he is a child, or delirious, or in some state of excitement or pre-occupation that won't let him think carefully.) Similar considerations, applied to such a question as the sale of poisons, may enable us to decide which possible kinds of regulation are contrary to principle and which are not. For example, a precaution such as labelling the drug with some word warning of its dangerous character can be enforced without violation of liberty: the buyer can't want *not to know* that the stuff he has bought has poisonous qualities. But

to require that in all such cases a doctor's prescription be produced would make it sometimes impossible, and always expensive, to obtain the article for legitimate uses. The only way that I can see of putting difficulties in the way of crime committed through poison, without significantly infringing on the liberty of those who want the poisonous substance for other purposes, is to provide what Bentham has aptly called 'preappointed evidence'. This is familiar to everyone in the case of contracts.

When a contract is entered into, it is usual and right that the law should require, as a condition of its being enforceable, that certain formalities should be observed—signatures, attestation of witnesses, and so on—so that if any dispute should later arise there will be evidence to show that the contract was really entered into, and that there was nothing in the circumstances to make it legally invalid: the effect being to throw great obstacles in the way of fictitious contracts, or contracts that wouldn't be valid if the circumstances in which they were made became known.

Precautions of a similar nature might be enforced in the sale of articles that could be used as instruments of crime. The seller, for example, might be required to enter in a register the exact time of the sale, the name and address of the buyer, and the precise quality and quantity sold; to ask what it was wanted for, and to record the answer he received. And when there was no medical prescription, the presence of some third person might be required, to bring home to the purchaser the fact •of what he was buying•, in case there should afterwards be reason to think it had been used for criminal purposes. Such regulations wouldn't make it much harder •to obtain the poison, but would make it much harder •to use it improperly without detection.

•Selling alcohol•

Society's inherent right to ward off crimes against itself by antecedent precautions suggests the obvious limitations to the maxim that purely self-regarding misconduct cannot properly be meddled with in the way of prevention or punishment. For example, drunkenness isn't a fit subject for legislative interference; but if someone had once been convicted of an act of violence to others under the influence of drink, I think it legitimate that *he* should be placed under a special legal restriction, personal to himself; that if he were ever again found drunk he would be liable to a penalty, and that if when in that state he committed another offence, the punishment he would be liable to for that other offence should be increased in severity. In a person whom drunkenness excites to do harm to others, making *himself* drunk is a crime against *others*. Another example: if an *idle* person isn't receiving support from the public or breaking a contract, it would be tyranny for him to be legally punished for his idleness; but if he is failing to perform his legal duties to others, as for instance to support his children, it is not tyrannical to force him to fulfil that obligation—by forced labour if no other means are available. This applies whether the source of the trouble is his idleness or some other avoidable cause.

Again, there are many acts which, being directly harmful only to the agents themselves, ought not to be legally prohibited, but which when done publicly are a violation of good manners. That brings them within the category of *offences against others*, and so they may rightfully be prohibited. Offences against decency come into this category, but I shan't spend time on them, especially since they are connected only indirectly with our subject. Indecent actions are thought of as wrong in themselves, whether or not done

publicly; but the objection to publicness—which is our subject—is equally strong in the case of many actions that aren't in themselves condemnable and aren't thought to be so by anyone.

There is another question to which we need an answer that is consistent with the principles I have laid down. Take some case of

personal conduct that is generally supposed to be blameable, but which respect for liberty prevents society from preventing or punishing, because the harm directly resulting from it falls wholly on the person himself.

The question is: if the agent is free to act like that, ought others to be equally free to advise or encourage him to do so? This question isn't entirely easy. When someone invites someone else to act in a certain way, we can't say that what the inviter is doing is 'strictly his own business'. Advising or inducing someone is a *social* act; so we might think that it—like actions in general that affect others—is amenable to social control. But a little reflection corrects the first impression by showing that even though the case doesn't fall strictly within the definition of individual liberty, it *does* fall within the scope of the *reasons for* the principle of individual liberty. Here is how. If people must be allowed, in whatever concerns only themselves, to act as seems best to themselves at their own peril, they must equally be free to consult with one another about what should be done—to exchange opinions and give and receive suggestions. *Whatever it is permitted to do, it must be permitted to advise to do*. The question is doubtful only when the advisor gets a personal benefit from his advice, when he makes his living out of promoting what society and the state consider to be an evil.

•Prostitution and gambling•

That introduces a new element of complication, namely, the existence of classes of people whose interests are opposed to what is considered as the good of the public, and whose way of living is based on counteracting that good. Ought this to be interfered with or not? For example, •fornication [= 'sexual intercourse outside marriage'] must be tolerated, and so must •gambling; but should a person be free to be a •pimp or to keep a •gambling-house? The case is one of those that lie on the exact boundary line between two principles, and it isn't immediately clear which of the two it properly belongs to. There are arguments on both sides. On the side of toleration this may be said:

The fact of following something as an occupation, and living or profiting by the practice of it, can't make criminal something that would otherwise be admissible. The act should either be consistently permitted or consistently prohibited. If the principles that we have been defending are true, society as such has no business deciding anything to be wrong that concerns only the individual. It can't go beyond dissuasion; and one person should be as free to persuade as another to dissuade.

In opposition to this it may be contended that:

Although the public or the state are not warranted in authoritatively deciding, for purposes of repression or punishment, that a given kind of conduct affecting only the interests of the individual is good or bad, if they do regard it as bad they are fully justified in assuming that there is at least an open *question* about whether it is bad or not. Given just this ·very minimal· assumption, they can't be acting wrongly in trying to exclude the influence of persuasions that are

self-interested, of encouragers who can't possibly be impartial—ones who have a direct personal interest on one side, the side the state believes to be wrong, and who admit that they have purely personal motives for promoting it. Surely nothing can be lost, no good can be sacrificed, by arranging things in such a way that individuals make their choice, whether wisely or foolishly, on *their own* initiative, as free as possible from the wiles of people who want to stimulate their inclinations for self-interested purposes of their own. Thus, although

the ·present· laws about gambling are utterly indefensible, and all people should be free to gamble in their own or each other's houses, or in any place of meeting established by their own subscriptions and open only to the members and their visitors,

nevertheless *public* gambling-houses shouldn't be permitted. It is true that the prohibition is never effective, and that however much tyrannical power is given to the police, gambling-houses can always be maintained under other pretences; but still they may be compelled to conduct their operations with a certain degree of secrecy and mystery, so that nobody knows anything about them but those who seek them. That is as much as society should aim at.

There is considerable force in these arguments. I shan't venture to decide whether they are sufficient to justify the moral anomaly of punishing the accessory to an act when the agent himself is (and must be) allowed to go free—of fining or imprisoning the pimp but not the prostitute or her client, the gambling-house keeper but not the gambler. Still less ought the common operations of buying and selling to be interfered with on analogous grounds. Almost every article that is

bought and sold could be used in excess, and the sellers have a financial interest in encouraging that excess; but no argument can be based on this in favour of (for instance) the Maine Law [see page 58]; because the class of dealers in strong drinks, though they have a financial interest in their product's being misused, are indispensably required for the sake of their legitimate use. However, the motivation these dealers have for promoting excessive use of alcohol is a real evil, and it justifies the state in imposing restrictions and requiring guarantees—ones that would be infringements of legitimate liberty if it weren't for that justification.

•Dissuasion•

A further question: when the state regards certain conduct as contrary to the best interests of the agent, should it without *forbidding* that conduct nevertheless *discourage* it? For example, should the state take measures to make the means of drunkenness more costly, or make them harder to get by limiting the number of the places where they are sold? On this as on most other practical questions, many distinctions need to be made. To tax stimulants solely so as to make them more difficult to obtain is a measure differing only in degree from prohibiting them entirely; and it would be justifiable only if prohibition were justifiable. Every increase of cost is a prohibition to those who can't afford the newly raised price; and to those who can afford it, the increase is a penalty inflicted on them for gratifying a particular taste. Their choice of pleasures, and their way of spending their income (after satisfying their legal and moral obligations to the state and to individuals), are their own concern and must be left to their own judgment. These considerations may seem at first sight to condemn the selection of alcohol as a special subject of taxation for purposes of revenue. But

it must be remembered •that taxation for fiscal purposes is absolutely inevitable; •that in most countries a considerable part of that taxation *has to* be indirect; and therefore •that the state can't help imposing penalties on the use of some articles of consumption—penalties that may prevent some people from buying such articles. So the state has a duty to consider, in the imposition of taxes, what commodities the consumers can best spare; and that points very clearly to commodities that it thinks are positively harmful when used in more than very moderate quantities. (Something that will *harm* people is certainly something they can *spare*!) So taxation of stimulants—up to the point that produces the largest amount of revenue (supposing that the state needs so much)—is not only admissible but to be approved of.

How exclusive a privilege should the sale of these commodities be? The answer depends on what purposes the restriction is intended to serve. All places where the public gather require the restraint of a police [here = 'the restraint of enforceable rules governing how they are run'], and this is especially true of drinking-places, because offences against society are especially apt to originate there. So it is appropriate •to confine the power of selling alcoholic drinks (at least for consumption on the spot) to persons of known or vouched-for respectability of conduct; •to make whatever regulations about hours of opening and closing are needed for public surveillance; and •to withdraw the license if breaches of the peace repeatedly take place through the connivance or incapacity of the keeper of the drinking-house, or if it becomes a rendezvous for thinking up and planning offences against the law. [Mill here uses 'connivance' in its proper meaning, which comes from a Latin word meaning 'to close one's eyes'. To *connive at* something is to pretend not to notice it, instead of putting a stop to it as you ought to do.] I can't think of any further restriction that would be in principle justifiable. What about limiting the

number of beer and spirit-houses so as to make them harder to get to, thus reducing the occasions of temptation? No. Not only does that expose *all* to an inconvenience because there are *some* who would make bad use of easily found drinking-houses, but also it is suited only to a state of society in which the labouring classes are openly treated as children or savages, and placed under a discipline of restraint—like that of a child—to fit them for future admission to the privileges of freedom. This is not the principle on which the labouring classes are said to be governed in any free country; and no-one who properly values freedom will assent to their being so governed unless this is the case:

All efforts have been exhausted to train them for freedom and govern them as freemen, and it has been definitively proved that they can only be governed as children.

The bare statement of this condition shows the absurdity of supposing that such efforts have been made in any case that needs be considered here. The institutions of this country are a mass of inconsistencies, with the result that

- we admit into our practice restraints that belong to the system of despotic government (also called 'paternal' government), while
- the general freedom of our institutions prevents the exercise of the *amount* of control that would be needed to make the restraints really effective as moral education.

•And so we get the worst of both worlds, so to speak.

•Contracts—slavery.

I pointed out in an early part of this work that the liberty of •the individual, in matters that concern him alone, implies a corresponding liberty in •any number of individuals to

regulate by mutual agreement such matters as involve them jointly and don't involve anyone else. There is no problem about this so long as the •will of all the people in question remains unaltered; but since that •will may change, it is often necessary (even when no-one else is affected) that they should enter into engagements [= roughly 'contracts'] with one another; and when they do, it is generally good that those engagements should be kept. Yet probably every country has laws creating some exceptions to this general rule. People are not held to engagements that violate the rights of third parties; but also it is sometimes considered a sufficient reason for releasing them from an engagement that it is harmful to themselves. In this and most other civilized countries, for example, an engagement by which a person sells himself (or allows himself to be sold) as a slave would be null and void—not enforced by law or by public opinion. The ground for thus limiting his power of voluntarily disposing of his own course of life is obvious, and is very clearly seen in this extreme case. Here it is.

The reason for *not* interfering with a person's voluntary acts except for the sake of others is consideration for his liberty. His voluntary choice is evidence that what he so chooses is desirable to him, or at least endurable by him, and his good is on the whole best provided for by allowing him to pursue it in his own way. But by selling himself as a slave he *abdicates* his liberty; he forgoes any future use of it after that single act. He therefore defeats the very purpose that is the justification for allowing him to dispose of himself. From now on he won't be free. . . . The principle of freedom can't require that he should be free not to be free! Being allowed to give up his freedom is not *freedom*.

These reasons, the force of which is so conspicuous in this special case, are evidently of far wider application; yet a limit is everywhere set to them by the necessities of life, which continually require not that we should give up our freedom but that we should consent to this or that limitation of it. But the principle that demands uncontrolled freedom of action in all that concerns only the agents themselves requires that those who have become obliged to one another in things that don't concern any third party should be able to release one another from their engagement. . . .

•Contracts—marriage•

Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt, in the excellent Essay from which I have already quoted, asserts his view that engagements involving personal relations or services should never be legally binding beyond a limited duration of time; and that the most important of these engagements, marriage, having the special feature that its objectives are defeated unless the feelings of *both* the parties are in harmony with it, should require nothing more than the declared wish of *either* party to dissolve it. This subject is too important and too complicated to be discussed in an aside, and I touch on it only so far as I need it for purposes of illustration. This work of Baron Humboldt's aims to be brief and very general; and that required him in this instance to settle for announcing his conclusion without discussing his reasons for it. If he had gone into the reasons, he would doubtless have recognized that the question can't be settled on grounds as simple as those to which he confines himself. When a person, either by explicit promise or by conduct, has encouraged someone else to rely on his continuing to act in a certain way—to build expectations and plans, and to stake any part of his plan of life on that supposition—a new series of moral obligations

arises on his part towards that person. They may possibly be overruled, but they can't be ignored. Again, if the relation between two contracting parties •has had consequences for others, if it •has placed third parties in any special position or even (as in the case of marriage) •has brought third parties *into existence*, then both the contracting parties come to have •obligations towards those third persons; and the choice of whether to maintain the original contract must have a great effect on whether—or at least on *how*—those •obligations are fulfilled. It doesn't follow—and I don't believe—that these obligations extend to requiring the fulfilment of the contract at all costs to the happiness of the reluctant party, but they are a necessary element in the question. And even if, as von Humboldt maintains, they ought to make no difference to the •legal freedom of the parties to release themselves from the engagement (and I also hold that they oughtn't to make *much* legal difference), they necessarily make a great difference to the parties' •moral freedom. A person is •morally• bound to take all these circumstances into account before deciding on a step that may affect such important interests of others; and if he doesn't allow proper weight to those interests he is morally responsible for the wrong •he does to the third parties•. I have made these obvious remarks as an aid to illustrating the general principle of liberty, and not because they are at all needed on the particular question •of divorce•. So far from needing reminders about obligations to third parties, discussions of divorce are usually handled as though the interests of children were everything, and those of adults were nothing!

•Power of husbands over wives•

I have already remarked that because there are no recognized general principles •governing it•, liberty is often granted

where it should be withheld, as well as withheld where it should be granted. One of the cases in which the sentiment of liberty is the strongest in modern Europe is a case where I think it is altogether misplaced. A person should be free to do as he likes in his own concerns, but he ought not to be free to do as he likes in acting for someone else under the pretext that the other person's affairs are *his* affairs. The state, while it respects the liberty of each in what specially concerns himself, is bound to maintain a vigilant control over his exercise of any power over others that it lets him have. This obligation is almost entirely disregarded in the case of family relations, a case whose direct influence on human happiness makes it more important than all the others taken together. The almost despotic power of husbands over wives isn't something I need to go into here, because it doesn't provide an illuminating work-out for the principle of liberty. There are two reasons for this. One is that cure for this despotism is perfectly simple: all that is needed for the complete removal of the evil is for wives to have the same rights, and to be protected by the law in the same manner, as everyone else. The other is that nobody defends the power of husbands over wives by mis-applying the notion of the husbands' liberty: on this subject, the defenders of established injustice don't avail themselves of the plea of *liberty*, but come out openly as the champions of *power*. It is in the case of *children* that misapplied notions of liberty are a real obstacle to the state's fulfilling its duties. One would almost think that a man's children were supposed to be literally (and not metaphorically) a *part of himself*, given how public opinion watches for and objects to the smallest interference of law with his absolute and exclusive control over them. It watches over this more than over almost any interference with the father's own freedom of action—so much less do people value liberty than they value power.

•Bringing up children•

Consider, for example, the case of education. Isn't it almost a self-evident axiom that the state should require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen? Yet who is there that isn't afraid to recognize and assert this truth? Hardly anyone indeed will deny that it is one of the most sacred duties of the parents (or, as law and usage now stand, the father!) after calling a human being into the world to give to that being an education fitting him to perform his part well in life towards others and towards himself. But while this is unanimously declared to be the father's duty, hardly anyone in this country will *listen* to the suggestion that he should be obliged to perform it. Instead of his being required to make any exertion or sacrifice for securing education to the child, it is left to his choice to accept it or not, even when it is provided at no cost to himself! It still isn't generally recognized that to bring a child into existence without a fair prospect of being able to provide food for its body and also instruction and training for its mind is a moral crime, both against the unfortunate offspring and against society; and that if the parent doesn't fulfil this obligation the state ought to ensure that it is fulfilled—with the costs falling on the parent as far as possible.

If the government's duty to enforce universal education were once admitted, that would put an end to the difficulties about *what* the state should teach, and *how* it should teach. These difficulties now convert the subject into a mere battle-field for sects and parties, causing the time and labour that should have been spent on educating to be wasted in quarrelling about education. If the government made up its mind to *require* a good education for every child, it could save itself the trouble of *providing* one. It could leave it up to

parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased, and restrict its own involvement to •helping to pay the school fees of the poorer classes of children, and •paying the entire school expenses of those who have no-one else to pay for them. The reasonable objections that are brought against State education don't apply to the •enforcement of education by the state; their target is the state's taking on itself the task of •directing that education, which is a totally different thing. No-one objects more strongly than I do to the state's being in charge of the whole or any large part of the education of the people. Everything I have said about the importance of individuality of •character, and variety in •opinions and •ways of life, applies also to variety in •education, which is of the same enormous importance as those three. A general state education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is the one that pleases the predominant power in the government, insofar as it is efficient and successful to that extent it establishes a despotism over the mind, which naturally leads to despotism over the body. And this is true whatever the predominant power may be—whether a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the people at that time. If there is to be *any* education established and controlled by the state, it should be merely one among many competing experiments, carried on for the purpose of example and stimulus, to keep the others up to a certain standard of excellence.

An exception to this generalization is created when a society in general is in such a backward condition that it can't or won't provide for itself *any* proper institutions of education unless the government takes on the task. In that case, indeed, the government may accept for itself, as the lesser of two great evils, the business of schools and universities; just as it

may take on the running of joint-stock companies in a country that has no system of private enterprise adequate for undertaking great works of industry.

But in general, if a country contains enough people qualified to provide education under government auspices, those same people would be able and willing to give an equally good education at private schools, given the assurance of payment that would be provided by a law making education compulsory, together with state aid to those unable to pay for themselves.

How could such a law be enforced? It would have to be through public examinations, extending to all children and beginning at an early age. An age might be fixed at which every child must be examined, to discover whether he or she could read. A child who turns out to be unable to read might be sent to school at the father's expense, unless the father had some sufficient ground of excuse; and he might also be subjected to a moderate fine which he could if necessary pay by *working* it off. Once in each year the examination should be renewed, with a gradually extending range of subjects, so as to make it virtually compulsory for everyone to have *and retain* a certain minimum of general knowledge. Beyond that minimum, there should be *voluntary* examinations on all subjects, at which all who reach a certain standard of proficiency might claim a certificate. To prevent the state from exercising through these arrangements an improper influence over opinion, the knowledge required for passing an examination should, even in the higher class of examinations, be strictly confined to facts and positive [= 'factual'] science—and of course the merely instrumental parts of knowledge, such as languages and their use. The examinations on religion, politics, or other controversial topics should depend not on the truth or falsehood of opinions ·about those topics·, but on matters

of fact—that such and such an opinion is held, on such and such grounds, by such and such authors, or schools, or churches. Under this system, the coming generation would be no worse off in regard to all controversial truths than they are at present; they would be brought up as churchmen or dissenters as they now are, the state merely taking care that they should be informed churchmen or informed dissenters. There would be nothing to hinder them from being taught religion, if their parents so chose, at the same schools where they were taught other things. All attempts by the state to bias the conclusions of its citizens on controversial subjects are evil; but the state may very properly offer to discover and certify that a person possesses the knowledge needed to make his conclusions, on any given subject, worth attending to. A student of philosophy would be the better for being able to pass an examination on both Locke and Kant, whichever of the two he takes up with, and even if he doesn't take up with either; and there is no reasonable objection to examining an atheist on the case for Christianity, provided he isn't required to proclaim that he accepts it. But I think that the examinations in the higher branches of knowledge should be entirely voluntary. It would give too dangerous a power to governments if *they* were allowed to exclude anyone from professions, even from the profession of teacher, for allegedly not being qualified. I agree with Wilhelm von Humboldt •that •university• degrees or other public certificates of scientific or professional acquirements should be given to all who present themselves for examination and pass the test; but •that such certificates should give them no advantage over competitors other than the weight that public opinion may give to them as evidence that the person is qualified.

•Having children•

It is not only in the matter of education that misplaced notions of liberty prevent the •moral obligations of parents from being recognized and •legal obligations on them from being imposed, in matters where there are always the strongest grounds for the •former and in many cases for the •latter also. The very act of causing the existence of a human being is one of the most responsible actions [= 'actions in which one takes on responsibilities'] in the range of human life. To undertake this responsibility—giving a life that may be either a curse or a blessing—is a crime against the offspring unless he or she will have at least the ordinary chances of a desirable existence. And in a country that is over-populated or threatened with being so, to produce more than a very small number of children is a serious offence against all who live by the pay they get for their work, because every new child threatens wage-levels by adding to the competition for work. The laws which in many countries on the European continent forbid marriage unless the parties can show that they have the means of supporting a family don't exceed the legitimate powers of the state: and whether such laws really are advisable (which mainly depends on local circumstances and feelings), they are not objectionable as violations of liberty. Such laws are interferences by the state to prohibit a bad act—an act injurious to others, which ought to bring criticism and social stigma even when it isn't thought advisable to add legal punishment. Yet the current ideas of liberty, which bend so easily to real infringements of the freedom of the individual in matters that concern only himself, would repel any attempt to restrain his inclinations when they will otherwise lead to lives of wretchedness and depravity for his offspring, with many evils to other people who are close enough to feel the effects of how the offspring

act. When we compare the strange •respect of mankind for liberty, with their strange •lack of respect for it, we might imagine that a man had an indispensable •right to do harm to others and •no right at all to please himself without doing harm to anyone.

•Size of government•

I have saved up till the last a large class of questions about the limits of government interference that don't strictly belong to the subject of this Essay but are closely connected with it. These questions arise when the reasons against interference don't turn on the principle of liberty. The question is not about •restraining the actions of individuals but about •helping them: it is asked whether the government should do or cause to be done something for their benefit, instead of leaving it to be done by themselves individually or in voluntary groups.

When government interference wouldn't involve any infringement of liberty, it may still be objected to on either of three grounds.

(1) The first is when the thing to be done is likely to be better done by individuals than by the government. Speaking generally, no-one is as fit to conduct a business or decide how or by whom it shall be conducted as are those whose personal interests are involved in it. This principle condemns the interferences (once so common) of the legislature or the officers of government in the ordinary processes of industry. But this matter has been sufficiently enlarged on by political economists, and is not particularly related to the principles of this Essay.

(2) The second objection has more to do with our subject. In many cases, though •individuals may not on average do the particular thing as well as the officers of government

would, it is nevertheless desirable that it should be done by •them as a means to their own mental education—a way of strengthening their active faculties, exercising their judgment, and giving them a familiar knowledge of the subjects with which they are thus left to deal. Though not the only reason, this is a chief reason for •jury trials in cases that aren't political; for •free and popular local and municipal institutions; for •having industrial and philanthropic enterprises run by voluntary associations. These aren't questions of *liberty*, and are connected with that subject only by remote tendencies; but they are questions of *development*. This is not the place to go at length into these things as parts of national education; as being indeed the special training of a citizen, the practical part of the political education of a free people, taking them out of the narrow circle of personal and family selfishness, getting them used to the wider view of joint interests, the management of joint concerns—habituating them to act from public or semi-public motives and guide their conduct by aims that unite them instead of isolating them from one another. Without these habits and powers, a free constitution can neither be worked nor preserved, as is illustrated by the too-often transitory nature of political freedom in countries where it doesn't rest on a sufficient basis of *local liberties*. The management of purely local business by the localities, and of the great enterprises of industry by the union of those who voluntarily put up the money for them, is further recommended by all the advantages that I have presented as belonging to individuality of development and variety in ways of acting. Government operations tend to be everywhere alike. With individuals and voluntary associations, on the other hand, there are varied experiments and endless diversity of experience. The state can usefully •make itself a central depository of the experience resulting from many trials,

and •actively circulate and diffuse knowledge about what that experience has shown. Its business is to enable each experimenter to benefit by the experiments of others, instead of tolerating no experiments but its own.

(3) The third and most powerful reason for restricting the interference of government is the great evil of adding unnecessarily to its power. Every function added to those already exercised by the government causes its influence over hopes and fears to be more widely diffused, and increasingly converts the active and ambitious part of the public into hangers-on of the government, or of some party that aims at becoming the government. If •the roads, the railways, the banks, the insurance offices, the great joint-stock companies, the universities, and the public charities, were all branches of the government; if in addition •the municipal corporations and local boards, with all that they now do, became departments of the central administration; and if •the employees of all these different enterprises were appointed and paid by the government, and looked to the government for every promotion or pay-increase, not all the freedom of the press and democratic constitution of the legislature would make this or any other country *free* except in name. And the more efficiently and scientifically the administrative machinery was constructed—the more skillful the arrangements for obtaining the best qualified hands and heads with which to work it—the greater the harm it would do. In England it has recently been proposed that all the members of the government's civil service should be selected by competitive examination, to obtain for those jobs the most intelligent and instructed persons that can be found; and much has been said and written for and against this proposal. One of the arguments most insisted on by its opponents is that a permanent official servant of the state doesn't have good enough prospects of salary and importance to attract the highest

talents, which will always be able to find a more inviting career in the professions, or in the service of companies and other public bodies. It would not have been surprising if this argument had been used by the *friends* of the proposition, as an answer to its principal difficulty. It is certainly strange coming from the *opponents*! What is urged as an •objection is •really• the •safety-valve of the proposed system. If indeed all the high talent of the country *could* be drawn into the service of the government, a proposal tending to bring about that result might well cause uneasiness. If every part of the business of society that required organized co-operation or large and comprehensive views were in the hands of the government, and if government posts were always filled by the ablest men, almost all the enlarged culture and practised intelligence in the country would be concentrated in a numerous bureaucracy, to whom alone the rest of the community would look for all things: the mass of people for direction and dictation in all they had to do; able and aspiring people for personal advancement. (I said 'almost all'. The exception would be the intelligence and ability of scientists and scholars.) The sole objects of ambition would be to be admitted into the ranks of this bureaucracy and to rise in it. Under this regime, •government that badly needs changing will not be changed•. •The outside public doesn't have the practical experience it needs to be qualified to criticize or check the mode of operation of the bureaucracy. And •even if the accidents of despotism or the natural working of democratic institutions occasionally raise to the summit a ruler or rulers who want to reform the government, no reform can be carried out that is contrary to the interests of the bureaucracy. That is the sad condition of the Russian empire, as is shown in the accounts of those who have had a good enough opportunity to observe it. The Czar himself is powerless against the bureaucratic body: he can send any

one of them to Siberia, but he can't govern without them or against their will. On every decree of his they have a tacit veto, which they can exercise by merely *not* carrying the decree into effect. In countries of more advanced civilization and of a more revolutionary spirit the public, accustomed to expect everything to be done for them by the state, or at least to do nothing for themselves without asking the state not only for permission to do it but even how it is to be done, naturally hold the state responsible for everything bad that happens to them; and when things become worse than they are willing to put up with, they rise against the government and make what is called a 'revolution'; whereupon somebody else, with or without legitimate authority from the nation, leaps into the seat of power, issues his orders to the bureaucracy, and everything goes on much as it did before—the bureaucracy being unchanged, and nobody else being capable of taking their place.

A very different scene appears among a people accustomed to transact their own business. In France a large part of the people have been engaged in military service, many having held at least the rank of noncommissioned officers; so in every popular uprising there are several persons competent to take the lead and improvise some reasonable plan of action. What the French are in military affairs, the Americans are in every kind of civil business: leave them without a government and every group of Americans is able to improvise one and to carry on that or any other public business with a sufficient amount of intelligence, order and decision. This is what every free people ought to be; and a people capable of this is certain to be free; it will never let itself be enslaved by any man or group of men who can take control only because they are able to seize and pull the reins of the central administration. No bureaucracy can hope to make such a people as *this* do or undergo

anything that they don't like. But where everything is done through the bureaucracy, nothing to which the bureaucracy is really opposed can be done at all. The constitution [here = 'governmental structure'] of such countries is an organization of the experience and practical ability of the nation into a disciplined body for the purpose of governing the rest; and the more perfect that organization is in itself, the more successful in drawing to itself and educating for its own purposes the ablest people from all ranks of the community, the more complete is the bondage of everyone—including *the members of the bureaucracy*. For the governors are as much the slaves of their organization and discipline as the governed are slaves of the governors. A Chinese mandarin is as much the tool and creature of a despotism as the humblest peasant. An individual Jesuit is to the utmost degree of abasement the slave of his order—the Society of Jesus—although the order itself exists for the collective power and importance of its members.

It should also be borne in mind that the absorption of all the principal *ability* of the country into the governing body is fatal, sooner or later, to the mental activity and progressiveness of the governing body itself. Its members are banded together, working a system which (like all systems) has to proceed to a large extent by fixed rules; and this puts them under the constant temptation of sinking into lazy routine, and if they occasionally desert that blinkered trudge along the same old path they have the temptation to rush into some half-examined crudity that has struck the fancy of some leading member of the corps. And the only guard against these closely allied (though seemingly opposite) tendencies, the only stimulus that can keep the ability of the governing body itself up to a high standard, is its being open to the watchful criticism of equally able people *outside* the body. So it is indispensable that there should be

some way, independently of the government, of having such able people and giving them the opportunities and experience necessary for a correct judgment of great practical affairs. If we do want to have permanently a skillful and efficient body of officials, above all, a body that can come up with original ideas and is willing to adopt improvements, and if we don't want our bureaucracy to degenerate into a pedantocracy, this body mustn't absorb into itself all the occupations that form and cultivate the skills required for the government of mankind.

So we have on one side the evils in over-large government, evils that are so formidable to human freedom and advancement; and on the other side the benefits that come from the collective application of the force of society (under its recognized leaders) for removing obstacles to its well-being. This gives us a question of balance, the question of how to secure as much of the advantages of centralized power and intelligence as possible without handing over to the government too great a proportion of the society's activity. In brief: At what point do the evils start to predominate over the benefits? This is one of the most difficult and complicated questions in the business of government. It is largely a question of detail, in which many and various considerations must be kept in view and no absolute rule can be laid down. But I believe that the practical principle that is needed for us to stay safe, the ideal to be kept in view, the standard by which to test all arrangements intended for overcoming the difficulty, can be expressed thus:

- the greatest dissemination of power consistent with efficiency, but
- the greatest possible centralization of information, and diffusion of it from the centre.

Applying the former of these would give a result like that in the New England states: all business that wouldn't be better

left to the individuals directly concerned would be distributed amongst a large number of public officials, chosen by the localities. And, applying the second of the two rules of thumb, each branch of local affairs would be superintended centrally by a branch of the general government; and the superintending body would act like a lens, concentrating the variety of information and experience derived from the conduct of that branch of public business in all the localities, from everything analogous that is done in foreign countries, and from the general principles of political science. This central organization should have a right to know all that is done, and a special duty to make the knowledge acquired in one place available for others. Freed from the petty prejudices and narrow views of a locality by its elevated position and wide sphere of observation, its advice would naturally carry much authority; but its actual power as a permanent institution should, in my view, be limited to compelling the local officers to obey the laws laid down for their guidance. In everything not provided for by general rules, those officers should be left to their own judgment, under responsibility to their constituents. For the violation of rules they should be answerable to the law, and the rules themselves should be laid down by the legislature; the central administrative authority only watching over whether they are obeyed and—if they are not—appealing to the courts to enforce the law or (as the case may be) appealing to the local constituencies to dismiss the officials who haven't acted in the spirit of the law. That is the general conception of how the Poor Law Board is intended to superintend the administrators of the Poor Rate in separate localities throughout this country. Whatever powers the Board has exercised beyond this limit were right and necessary in that particular case, to cure maladministration in matters deeply affecting not merely the localities but the whole country; since no locality has a moral

right to mismanage in such a way as to turn itself into a nest of pauperism, necessarily overflowing into other localities and worsening the moral and physical condition of the whole labouring community. The Poor Law Board has **powers** of administrative coercion and subordinate legislation which, owing to the state of opinion on the subject, it doesn't use much. It is perfectly justifiable in using them in a case where the national interest is significantly involved, but they would be wholly out of place in the supervision of purely local interests. But a central organ of **information** and instruction for all the localities would be equally valuable in all branches of administration. A government can't have too much of the kind of activity that positively aids and stimulates individual effort and development. The trouble starts when instead of arousing the activity and powers of individuals and bodies it substitutes its own activity for theirs; when, instead of informing, advising, and sometimes

denouncing, it makes them work in chains or orders them to stand aside while it does their work for them. The worth of a state in the long run is the worth of the individuals composing it. A state that dwarfs its individuals in order to make them easier to lead will find—even if it wanted to lead for beneficial purposes—that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished. And a state that makes

- the interests of the individuals' mental expansion and elevation

subordinate to

- having a little more administrative skill (or the semblance of it that practice gives) in the details of business

will eventually find that the perfection of machinery to which it has sacrificed everything will do no good, because of the lack of the vital power which, in order that the machine might work more smoothly, it has preferred to banish.