Liberty

John Stuart Mill

Copyright © 2010–2015 All rights reserved. Jonathan Bennett

[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.

First launched: March 2005 Last amended: April 2008

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 liberalism, 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 anti-climax, 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 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 *un*prevailing 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.