

Mill's Harm Principle

1 The Principle

“The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That 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. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right. These are good reasons for remonstrating with him, or reasoning with him, or persuading him, or entreating him, but not for compelling him, or visiting him with any evil in case he do otherwise. To justify that, the conduct from which it is desired to deter him, must be calculated to produce evil to some one else. The only part of the conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign.” (*On Liberty*, ch. 1, ¶19)

“There are many who consider as an injury to themselves any conduct which they have a distaste for, and resent it as an outrage to their feelings; as a religious bigot, when charged with disregarding the religious feelings of others, has been known to retort that they disregard his feelings, by persisting in their abominable worship or creed. But there is no parity between the feeling of a person for his own opinion, and the feeling of another who is offended at his holding it; no more than between the desire of a thief to take a purse, and the desire of the right owner to keep it. And a person's taste is as much his own peculiar concern as his opinion or his purse.” (*On Liberty* ch. 4, ¶12)

2 Qualifications

Individuals can be required to help others (Ch. 1, ¶11). That is, the state can interfere with their liberty to make them help others, even if what they would otherwise be doing isn't harmful.

Examples:

1. giving evidence in court (ch. 1, ¶11).
2. contributing a fair share to common defense and other public goods (ch. 4, ¶3).
3. mutual aid (ch. 1, ¶11).
4. Government may regulate trade (e.g. fixing prices or regulating manufacture), because such conduct is not purely private (ch. 4, ¶4).
5. The state should make education compulsory, limiting parents' liberty (ch. 5, ¶12-14).