

J.S. Mill: On Liberty

QUESTIONS ON SECTION 2

1. What does Mill say about the possibility of depriving even only one individual (whose opinion goes against the accepted consensus) of his or her dissenting opinion?
2. Why is the practice of contradicting an opinion an important epistemic task, in the process of acquiring knowledge about the world?
3. Why should even the opinion of the holiest, most reliable, and most esteemed man be open to contradiction by others?
4. What conception of *knowledge* and *certainty* comes out of Mill's words in this section? Can we be *certain* of any proposition, according to the theory of knowledge that Mill outlines in "On Liberty"?
5. Can we deny someone the right to hold her opinion on grounds of usefulness (or lack thereof) of that opinion? That is, can we prevent an opinion from being held and expressed on the basis of the fact that that opinion is dangerous and, for instance, socially destabilizing?
6. What does it mean, according to Mill, to assume *infallibilism* in the moral or political sense? Is it enough to be absolutely sure of one's own opinion to be an infallibilist? [N.B. There is a difference between being deaf to any opinion that is different from one's own, and preventing others from being exposed to diversity of opinions.]
7. The examples of Socrates and Jesus, on the one hand, and Marcus Aurelius, on the other, serve two different purposes. Why does Mill, after having already provided two examples, feel the need to introduce a third one, from a different perspective? There is an implicit rejoinder, that Mill's virtual critic could make, and to which Mill is responding: what is the possible rejoinder?
8. Some critics of Mill argue that prosecution of even true opinions is a "necessary evil" through which truth must always (or often) pass. What does Mill reply to that?
9. Who are the biggest losers in a society, when dissenting thought and opinion are being persecuted? Are those whose opinions are repressed the major losers in that game? Who else is losing, from the impossibility to freely discuss and challenge the accepted consensus or the majority's opinion?
10. What is the difference between holding an opinion because it has been given to us by authority and holding an opinion because we have *knowledge* of the facts expressed in that opinion?
11. Can we learn without contradicting? That is, can we gain knowledge without the need of confronting our opinions with all (or many) of their contradictories? Which class of sciences is open to that type of learning?
12. Can we learn about morality, politics, religion and other disciplines in the same way as we learn about mathematics, logics, the natural sciences, etc.? Why? Why is the distinction important for Mill's discussion on the liberty of thought and opinion?

13. What happens when a religion is believed without its contradictory being known? Why is it morally unacceptable to hold religious beliefs in the same easy as we practice *customs* or *habits*?
14. What is the paradox that seems to arise from Mill's conception of knowledge and his statements about the necessity of contradictories for gaining knowledge in the areas of morality, religion, etc.?
15. "[] and until people are again systematically trained to it [the plato/socratic way of argumentation by contradictory], there will be few great thinkers, and a low general average of intellect, in any but the mathematical and physical departments of speculation". Why, according to Mill, does humanity need "Socratics"?
16. In which sense can an opinion be neither true nor false? And why is this an important class of opinions in Mill's analysis? Which ones are the domains of knowledge where we find most of the opinions therein expressed to be neither completely true nor false?
17. Are there any opinions, of which we can know whether they are entirely true or entirely false? Do those opinions give us moral or practical reasons for rejecting and/or suppressing their contradictories?

LECTURES NOTES ON SECTIONS 1 AND 2

Section I: topics

- Introduction [5-8]
 - On the threats to liberty coming from tyranny [6]
 - On the threats to liberty coming from the majority [7-8]
- Establishment of a *principle of legitimate interference* and statement of a practical question [9-13]
- *No-harm principle* [14-16]
- Sphere of non-interference [17-19]
 - Liberty of thought and opinion [→ section II];
 - Liberty of tastes and pursuits and preference;
 - Liberty of combination among individuals.

Section II: structure of Mill's argument

The thesis being defended: no one should be denied the freedom to hold any opinion or thought.

Hypothesis 1: The opinion is *true*.

- 1st Argument: Assuming that an opinion is false, with no possibility of contradiction, is to assume *infallibility*. [22]

- Rejoinder: We need a *principle of action*, therefore we must assume, given a certain opinion and the necessity to act on that basis of that opinion, either that that opinion is true or that it is false. [23]
- 2nd Argument (part a): Assuming that an opinion is true or false for the sake of action and assuming the truth or falsity of an opinion *in order to suppress the opposite opinion* are two distinct things. [24]
- 2nd Argument (part b): Acceptance of an opinion for the sake of action implies that the opinion is open for discussion and disapproval. [24-26]
- Rejoinder: We suppress opinions that we deem false for the sake of *utility*, not for the sake of truth. [27]
- 3rd Argument: To suppress an opinion for the sake of utility is to simply *shift the assumption of infallibility*, as it amounts to pretending to know what is useful and what is not. [27]
- Illustrations of the “evils” of infallibilism: Socrates and Jesus [28-29]
- Implicit rejoinders: “We have learned from history”; “We are in a civilized age, we do not make the same mistakes”; etc. [30]
- Counter-argument: Even Marcus Aurelius made the same mistakes. [31-32]

Hypothesis 2: The opinion is *false*.

- 1st Argument: Truth is not learned by authority but by confrontation with falsity. True knowledge comes from identifying the true opinion among the false ones. [40]
- Rejoinder: We can learn the true opinion by *arguing for it*, as we do with the propositions of logic or mathematics. [41]
- 2nd Argument (part a): The opinions of logic, mathematics, etc. are simple, and open to *direct proof* or *direct refutation*, unlike the opinions of religion, morality, social relations, etc. [42]
- 2nd Argument (part b): Complex opinions, such as moral opinions, are better and more strongly argued for, with the *Socratic method*, and established, *until proven otherwise* [44]. [43-48]
- Rejoinder in the form of a paradox: “Is the absence of unanimity an indispensable condition for truth?” [49]
- 3rd Argument: It is inevitable that, as humanity progresses, the pool of dissensus shrinks; this is mostly seen as a positive fact in society. Nonetheless, not all of the consequences of that tendency are beneficial: if one day all truths were to be agreed on, we would still need people like Socrates to challenge those truths *for the sake of learning and understanding*. [50-51]

Hypothesis 3: The opinion is neither true nor false.

- 1st Argument: There are opinions which are neither entirely true nor entirely false, because they are complex opinions and therefore made up of both true and false subordinate opinions. [53]

- E.g. 1: The principles of Enlightenment seemed to be the “new truth”, but J. J. Rousseau showed its flaws in several of his writings.
- E.g. 2: Politics — “In politics, again, it is almost a commonplace, that a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life;” [53]
- Rejoinder: But of *some* opinions we cannot doubt that they are even partly false (e.g. Christian Morality). [54-55]
- 2nd Argument: When we say that some opinions cannot be even partly false, much depends on the definitions we use. What do we mean by ‘Christian morality’? The Old Testament, the New testament, the doctrine of Christ and the Apostles, or the one elaborated in the first centuries A.D. (the *Canon* of the Church). [55]