

The theory of democracy » Democratic ideas from Pericles to Rawls » Mill

In his work *On Liberty* (1859) John Stuart Mill argued on utilitarian grounds (*see utilitarianism*) that **individual liberty** cannot be legitimately infringed—whether by government, society, or individuals—except in cases where the individual's action would cause harm to others. In a celebrated formulation of this principle, Mill wrote 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.... The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.

Mill's principle provided a philosophical foundation for some of the basic freedoms essential to a functioning democracy, such as freedom of association (*see below* **Ideal and representative democracy**), and undermined the legitimacy of paternalistic laws, such as those requiring temperance, which in Mill's view treated adult citizens like children. In the area of what he called the liberty of thought and discussion, another freedom crucial to democracy, Mill argued, also on utilitarian grounds, that legal restrictions on the expression of opinion are never justified. The "collision of adverse opinions," he contended, is a necessary part of any society's search for the truth. In another work, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Mill set forth in a lucid and penetrating manner many of the essential features of the new type of government, which had not yet emerged in Continental Europe and was still incomplete in important respects in the United States. In this work he also advanced a powerful argument on behalf of **woman suffrage**—a position that virtually all previous political philosophers (all of them male, of course) had ignored or rejected.