

Felsefe Arkivi

Archives of Philosophy

Review Article

Open Access

A Comparison between Locke's and Mill's Notions of Liberty

Locke ve Mill'in Özgürlük Kavramları Arasında Bir Karşılaştırma



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Abstract

Throughout the last few centuries of human intellectual history, liberty has consistently assumed a prominent role as a fundamental philosophical concept. Among the various schools of political thought, the Liberalism ideology emphasizes freedom the most. In this study, two important philosophers of the liberal tradition who conducted discussions on liberalism, John Locke and John Stuart Mill, are discussed. The research method is compilation, and the similarities and differences between the thoughts of the two philosophers have been examined. According to the results of the research, Locke, who lived throughout the seventeenth century, focused on the concept of natural law, while Mill, a nineteenth-century liberal, followed a Utilitarian approach. While Locke emphasized that freedom and will are separate in terms of the abilities of the mind, Mill argued that causality is not contrary to freedom and does not mean absolute determinism by suggesting the separation of freedom and causality. Locke advocated religious tolerance and the separation of church and state. In contrast, Mill understood liberty in terms of individual autonomy and minority rights within a democratic framework, arguing freedom of expression, thought, and action should only be restricted to prevent harm to others. Despite these differences, freedom continues to be important as a general subject that should be discussed beyond the principles of the age. Furthermore, both philosophers underscored the intrinsic value of liberty as essential for human flourishing, societal progress, and the pursuit of happiness.

Öz

İnsanlığın düşünsel tarihinin son birkaç yüzyılı boyunca özgürlük, temel bir felsefi kavram olarak önemli bir rol üstlenmiştir. Siyasi düşüncenin çeşitli ekolleri arasında özgürlüğe en çok vurgu yapan ideoloji Liberalizmdir. Bu çalışmada liberal geleneğin iki önemli filozofu olan ve liberalizm üzerine tartışmalar yürüten John Locke ve John Stuart Mill ele alınmaktadır. Araştırma yöntemi derleme olup, iki filozofun düşünceleri arasındaki benzerlik ve farklılıklar incelenmiştir. Araştırma sonuçlarına göre, on yedinci yüzyıl boyunca yaşamış olan Locke doğal hukuk kavramına odaklanırken, on dokuzuncu yüzyıl liberallerinden Mill faydacı bir yaklaşım izlemiştir. Locke, zihnin yetenekleri açısından özgürlük ve iradenin ayrı olduğunu vurgularken, Mill özgürlük ve nedenselliğin ayrılmasını öne sürerek nedenselliğin özgürlüğe aykırı olmadığını ve mutlak determinizm anlamına gelmediğini savunmuştur. Locke dini hoşgörüyü ve kilise ile devletin ayrılmasını savunmuştur. Buna karşılık Mill, özgürlüğü demokratik bir çerçevede bireysel özerklik ve azınlık hakları açısından anlamış, ifade, düşünce ve eylem özgürlüğünün yalnızca başkalarına zarar gelmesini önlemek için kısıtlanması gerektiğini savunmuştur. Bu farklılıklara rağmen özgürlük, çağın ilkelerinin ötesinde tartışılması gereken genel bir konu olarak önemini korumaya devam etmektedir. Ayrıca, her iki filozof da özgürlüğün insanın gelişmesi, toplumsal ilerleme ve mutluluk arayışı için gerekli olan içsel değerinin altını çizmiştir.

Keywords

John Locke · John Stuart Mill · liberty · freedom · liberalism

Anahtar Kelimeler

John Locke · John Stuart Mill · özgürlük · bağımsızlık · liberalizm



“ Citation: Assadi, Soheil. "A Comparison between Locke's and Mill's notions of liberty". *Felsefe Arkivi–Archives of Philosophy*. Advance Online Publication <https://doi.org/10.26650/arc.1496585>

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Introduction

There has been a surprising resemblance to a single term and common social desire among human beings of at least the last few centuries. It has been so grave to an extent that it covers the whole of humanity under a single unified umbrella, a notion that, at the same time, is a universal source of hope. In the last few centuries, modern human beings have been continuously searching for freedom. However, they were oblivious to a comprehensive idea and their own powers, which impelled philosophers to engage in determining limits and boundaries of such hope for a better life, emancipation from things considered cruel, into a state of cherished desire. In the Western post-Renaissance world, people started gradually realizing their powers, and accordingly, their desire for liberty and freedom grew to a noticeable point. Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant contributed significantly to the notion of freedom during this period. Consequently, the post-Renaissance Western world witnessed a gradual realization of individual power, leading to a heightened desire for liberty and freedom.

Ever since, there have been different approaches to liberty. Some believe freedom is a gift by the kindness of legitimate democratic governments to their own people. Others have claimed that freedom is a precious entity given to humankind by a benevolent God, or loving nature, fundamental and profound, no one is allowed to take it away from them and it is up to them to give it away to their governments in exchange for something else, or not; to keep it as a source of protection against tyrannical rule. In this paper, the second approach is praised and defended by comparing the viewpoints of two distinguished liberal philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England.

Although “liberty” and “freedom” may seem synonymous at first glance, there is a distinguishing difference in their definitions. Liberty, which is the main theme of this paper, has roots in the Latin “*Libertas*” and originated from the fourteenth-century French “*Liberté*”, which refers to any “absence of restraint” to act among some choices as one wishes to.¹ Therefore, it depicts a sense of right or ability granted by a higher power to a chosen group of people. On the other hand, freedom, a much older term, is usually defined as a “state of free will” or “emancipation from slavery” before the fourteenth century and moves more toward the definition of liberty as the term started to appear in English literature.² Locke and Mill represent crucial stages in the evolution of ideas about liberty. Locke laid the groundwork for individual rights and limited government, while Mill refined the concept of liberty within a utilitarian framework.

Both philosophers considered in this paper were pro-liberal rights. They believed in a few fundamental human rights, mainly liberty. Besides the fact that they both belong to a common school of political thought, namely liberalism, I have chosen them for comparison due to their effort to understand liberty as the main pillar of civilized human life and empowered civilization itself.

John Locke's Era and His Thought on Liberty

No need to mention in detail that any philosophy is deeply intertwined with the boundaries, hazards, hopes, and passions of the period in which its mastermind has lived. John Locke lived through a time of inquisition, by and large, a rather “repressive” one.³ In other words, he was living in the most unstable period of British history, the seventeenth century. Overthrowing and restoration of the Stuart dynasty, Oliver Cromwell's protectorate era, the “Glorious Revolution” of 1688, and the disposition of James II from the

¹For a detailed discussion, see: Online Etymology Dictionary, <http://www.etymonline.com/>.

²Online Etymology Dictionary.

³John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 17.



throne all occurred in John Locke's lifetime. Locke is commonly regarded as the founder of liberalism, and even more notable, he is concerned with the building blocks of Liberalism: a proponent of majority rule by individual rights⁴, no less than being a revolutionary regarding his theory of knowledge – his unique epistemology. In addition, he is a humanist according to the standards of his own age. It is possible to classify his major contribution to political philosophy under categories of fundamental human rights, such as freedom of speech, thought, and tolerance toward each other, while responsible for a healthier society in terms of coherent social strata.⁵

The ruling class in England was suspicious and fearful of growing Roman Catholic influence from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Even Locke, as well as the majority of pious protestant Englishmen, publicly denounced such a threat.⁶ Political theorists, theologians, and activists were largely divided into two hostile groups: those in favor of absolutist governments and those against any arbitrary rule, such as Locke.⁷ By the end of the century, in continental Europe, about five percent of the French population of the time who were protestants had to flee their hometowns or face severe consequences due to their belief.⁸ Many sought refuge in England, which was, although a bit less than the Netherlands, a haven for protestant minorities of Europe. Huguenots⁹ were not alone in discrimination based on their beliefs; there were other groups who shared the same fate. A century-old dispute in profundity that divided the church seemed to bring new momentum. Temples were destroyed, forced conversions promoted, children were transferred to different parents, and many lost their lives, while more fortunate ones merely lost their homes.¹⁰ A complete picture of brutality fueled by intwas painted on Europeed Europe.

Incidents from continental Europe, in addition to absolutist inclinations of the Pope's bureaucracy and post-civil war monarch's tendencies to Catholicism, led the men of the parliament to pass the 1673-1678 Test Act denying Catholics, with an exemption of the sovereign, any civil and military offices in due time before England turn into "an absolute tyranny".¹¹ It was such a period that toleration was necessary. In his exile in the Netherlands, Locke realized that toleration was the key to stability. By close observation of Dutch society, he found out that the key to an almost perfect political equilibrium lies in the acceptance of others, those who are not threatening the liberties of people by their own political power in hand. Surprisingly, Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* was written and published during this period, not in a time when he was younger and lived in Oxford. But it has been said that Locke is rather strange. At the same time as he promoted tolerance, he stood firmly intolerant toward Roman Catholics, Atheists, and Muslims.¹² There might be some justifications; however, Locke's emphasis on reason necessitates a critical examination of this obvious inconsistency.

First, we should not forget that Locke was deeply religious, contrary to what we may think of him. By the same token, he was living in an era of European history in which "God's" presence was above any single

⁴C. B. Macpherson, "The Social Bearing of Locke's Political Theory," *Life, Liberty, and Property: Essays on Locke's Political Ideas*, ed. Gordon J. Schochet (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 61.

⁵John Dunn, "Measuring Locke's Shadow," *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration by John Locke*, ed. Ian Shapiro (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 265.

⁶Marshall, *John Locke*, 28.

⁷Duncan Ivison, "Locke, Liberalism and Empire," *The Philosophy of John Locke; New Perspectives*, ed. Peter R. Anstey (New York: Routledge, 2003), 94.

⁸Marshall, *John Locke*, 17.

⁹A famous group of protestants, more precisely; French Calvinists in the 16th and 17th centuries.

¹⁰William Beik, "The Culture of Protest in Seventeenth-century French Towns", 5-6.

¹¹Marshall, *John Locke*, 29-30.

¹²Marshall, *John Locke*; Ian Shapiro, "Introduction: Reading Locke Today," in *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration by John Locke*, ed. Ian Shapiro (London: Yale University Press, 2003), xiii.



philosophical thought.¹³ For instance, he puts a lot of effort into refuting such an odd view that holds Christians exclusively responsible for the persecution of others based on belief.¹⁴ Or, his main account of reasoning for the advantage of toleration is supported by the Christian Bible - New Testament - itself.¹⁵ These rules were quite customary among intellectuals of that age. Regarding the second point, among Shaftesbury's letters and speeches, which were quite in-depth of parliamentary activities against the king, we get into a belief, or a form of conspiracy, however, seemingly predominant among Englishmen of the time that France was after a "Popish Plot" - an engineered Catholic overthrow of Protestantism once and for good in England.¹⁶ It seems his objection was based on mere political grounds rather than religious foundations.¹⁷ After all, Locke was an advocate of the separation of church and state, and his theory of toleration was aimed at nongovernmental religious debates.¹⁸ He did not recognize any just and fair laws on behalf of a government to intervene in the affairs of religious institutions.¹⁹

Nobody therefore, in fine, neither single persons, no churches, nay, nor even commonwealths, have any just title to invade the civil rights and worldly goods of each other, upon pretence of religion ... the care of souls does not belong to the magistrate ... As the magistrate has no power to impose, by his laws, the use of any rites and ceremonies in any church; so neither has he any power to forbid the use of such rites and ceremonies as are already received, approved, and practiced by any church.²⁰

Whether it was seen as a "plot" or a "conspiracy", it is evident that John Locke was significantly influenced by the prevailing cultural and intellectual sentiments of his time. The ideas and philosophies circulating during his period shaped his thinking and writings, reflecting the broader context of the era in which he lived. Only in a manuscript later known as *Critical Notes on Edward Stillingfleet's Mischief of Separation* (1681) did he soften his voice on Catholics, declaring that they deserve toleration merely on accounts of worship alone.²¹ But Locke continues, if they engage in politics and unite with their Church of Rome on grounds of prejudice, and possibly inquisition, they are the ones that will start threatening others based on intolerance and absolutism, as incidents of France revealed earlier.²² Moreover, we can step further from his point, presuming his reasoning of intolerance toward Atheists and Muslims. We may say Locke did not trust them considerably while, politically speaking; they cannot be trusted on oaths and promises, and in various cases, they are dependent on foreign authorities as he mentions both instances in *Letters*.²³ Or, it has been said that Locke was not a democratic figure, but a liberal, even though his liberalism was far different from ours.²⁴ In any case by such accounts of empirical understanding, Locke in his *Second Treatise* argues in favor of people's fundamental rights and liberties that will be at stake. Accordingly, Locke enters

¹³Dunn, "Measuring" 271.

¹⁴See: John Locke, *The Works of John Locke, A New Edition, Corrected, Volume VI* (Germany: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1963), 15; Dunn, 274.

¹⁵See: Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume VI*, 8-9;15.

¹⁶Marshall, *John Locke*, 31-33.

¹⁷See: Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume VI*, 9; Shapiro, "Introduction: Reading Locke Today", xiii.

¹⁸Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume VI*, 9.

¹⁹Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume VI*, 33.

²⁰Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume VI*, 20-23, 33.

²¹Marshall, *John Locke*, 37.

²²Marshall, *John Locke*, 52.

²³See: Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume VI*, 47, 416.

²⁴Ruth W. Grant, "John Locke on Women and the Family," *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration by John Locke*, ed. Ian Shapiro (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 296-301.



his notion of liberty, which is a state of freedom when the fundamental rights of people are not threatened.²⁵ What fundamental rights are and who determines them? We now briefly address this point. However, before that, it is worth mentioning Locke's twofold attempt to understand liberty. As I name them according to their orientation toward the subject, they are as follows: (1) an external view of the topic within widespread political and social boundaries of humankind; an attribute of natural law; (2) an internal view from the motions and agents of the human mind, an attribute of the mind. I believe Locke's spheres of definition of liberty would be obscure without such a distinction.

Liberty as an attribute of Natural Law: We can pursue our quest to understand Locke's idea of liberty from another angle, through Locke's theory of knowledge, provided by him in his later writings. Since Von Leyden's primal translations of Locke's Latin works, we have realized common grounds of reasoning he makes on both his political theory and theory of knowledge.²⁶ Locke based both his theories of empiricism and politics on the burden of Natural Law. According to him, the main difference between humans and animals is a set of moral laws that they inherit, whether in the state of nature or later, by living in civil societies, which can be proven through the rationality that God has given to them. How do we know this? Locke replied with his famous epistemological understanding that all our knowledge comes from experience, and by that we must have accumulated enough, experience-driven data for such a conclusion to get materialized, in the first place, in our minds. We will continue to pursue your inquiry. Because there are no innate ideas, how are we supposed to know the deity via experience? Well, Locke would direct us to the first cause and the logical necessity for the being and deduce the sciences of logic and mathematics from his general empiricism.²⁷

Due to the rationality of humankind, eternal subjection to Natural Law is a valid argument, Locke asserts.²⁸ He argues that it is God's will as a standard for right and wrong imposed on humans and defines for them a set of conditions and rules, such as possessing property, preserving life, worshiping God, and living peacefully, to name a few.²⁹ It is possible to say that Locke's concept, as well as the function of Natural Law, is derived from laws of nature, in which "conditions of peace, prosperity, and public happiness" can be traced out.³⁰ The state of nature for humans is "a state of perfect freedom" regarding "possessions and persons" bound to Natural Law.³¹ Because they are naturally "free", "independent", and "equal".³² Their immense amount of freedom is due to the almost perfect equality they enjoy in the state of nature.³³ Unlike Hobbes' state of nature, before the formation of civil society, there were fewer concerns about security than poverty and the adversity of natural conditions.³⁴ However, generally speaking, for the sake of assured security, especially on property, better life span, prosperity, and progress, they will consequently come to a consent and form a government and establish courts to observe the law in exchange for a bit of their almost limitless liberty. The first of the two exclusive powers humans possess in the state of nature will lead them

²⁵Marshall, *John Locke*, 53-54.

²⁶See: W. Von Layden, "John Locke and Natural Law," in *Life, Liberty, and Property: Essays on Locke's Political Ideas*, ed. Gordon J. Schochet (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 12.

²⁷See: Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume II*, 107-8.

²⁸W. Von Layden, "John Locke and Natural Law," in *Life, Liberty, and Property: Essays on Locke's Political Ideas*, ed. Gordon J. Schochet (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 15.

²⁹Layden, "John Locke and Natural Law," 15-17.

³⁰Leo Strauss, "Locke and the Modern Theory of Natural Right," *Life, Liberty, and Property: Essays on Locke's Political Ideas*, ed. Gordon J. Schochet (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 31.

³¹(References to *Two Treatises of Government* is by their paragraph number (§) based on Ian Shapiro's edition). John Locke, *The Second Treatise: An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*, §4.

³²Locke, *The Second Treatise*, §95.

³³Robert A. Goldwin, "John Locke," *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 477.

³⁴Goldwin, "John Locke," 485.



out of nature's dark side toward the formation of civil society; according to Locke, a person in the state of nature has the power to preserve herself and to punish those who deviate from the law.³⁵ The former power will enable individual survival, whereas the latter will bring people together to form a cohesive society.

Then, the ruler of the community has to offer them qualities that they lacked in the state of nature. Otherwise, people have the right to remove that government and seek a new one. What is more, people have not only the right to dismiss but also due to circumstances violently overthrow a despotic ruler.³⁶ They are born with "natural freedom", contrary to the predominant philosophical belief of Locke's own time; humans are intrinsically capable of such freedom intrinsically.³⁷ Locke believes in a broad range of profound rights for individuals by considering them as the main pillars of the community and the state.³⁸ These rights should not be violated unless there is majority consent; yet, the majority cannot wish for an act of absolute power over itself to disregard its own natural rights. The natural law for Locke is the sole divine law for humans and by itself halts any other laws necessarily.³⁹ There is no need for civil society to define new laws. Instead, they should be eventful by understanding and safeguarding natural rights divinity gave to humans unconditionally. Let us examine an example that has been questionable for some philosophers. No one can make himself a slave. Locke mentions that no one can give away more power than one possess, and no one has the power to enslave or kill her/his own self.⁴⁰ Legitimate community consent, however, can force someone, due to his/her ill manners, into various imprisonments, not slavery in time of peace. Surprisingly, it is possible for victors of a just war to retain slaves from their enemy, but this is not allowed, Locke mentions, by the Natural Law under any other circumstances. I think Locke wants to remark that only within unjust and evil conditions can one party have absolute power, and the other can be derived from fundamental natural rights. War is one of the evil predicaments, and tyranny is the other. Hence, he says:

Freedom of men under government is to have a standing rule to live by, common to every one of the society, and made by the legislative power erected in it; a liberty to follow my own will in all things, where the rule prescribes not; and not to be subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man: as freedom of nature is, to be under no other restraint but the law of nature.⁴¹

Locke comes to one of his conclusions that by a set of data comes to our senses; we gain empirical knowledge to arm our reasoning to prove there is a profound set of Natural Laws in which several rights to liberty are among them. Locke was favoring the idea that without the law (a well-known and established law), there would be no freedom as well; in states of ignorance of law, tyrannies emerge and liberties vanish.⁴² Therefore, we trace the shadow of law in every corner of Locke's conclusion, regardless of the subject.

Boundaries of human liberty are within the Natural Law itself; they are free up to levels that do not contradict the Natural Law, Locke claims.⁴³ In fact, this means that human liberty is bound to the "main

³⁵Locke, *The Second Treatise...*, §128; Goldwin, 496-497.

³⁶Richard I. Aaron, "Authority and the Right of Individuals," *Life, Liberty, and Property: Essays on Locke's Political Ideas*, ed. Gordon J. Schochet (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 165.

³⁷John Locke, *The First Treatise: the False Principles and Foundations of Sir Robert Filmer*, §15.

³⁸Aaron, 167; Willmoore Kendall, "The Right of the Majority," *Life, Liberty, and Property: Essays on Locke's Political Ideas*, ed. Gordon J. Schochet (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1971), 175.

³⁹Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy...* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1969), 594.

⁴⁰Locke, *The Second Treatise...*, §23.

⁴¹Locke, *The Second Treatise...*, §22.

⁴²Goldwin, "John Locke," 509.

⁴³Ian Shapiro, "John Locke's Democratic Theory," *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration by John Locke*, ed. Ian Shapiro (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 318; Aaron, 165-166.



intentions of nature” and whatever contradicts that i.e. “adultery, incest, sodomy” and “sins” as such, crossing the lines that God determined through laws of nature for us, therefore it is not allowed and should not be tolerated at all.⁴⁴ For example, God does not forbid one to prefer a religion over another, Locke argues, through his affiliated theological reasoning; but divinity clearly forbids whatever contradicts the nature.⁴⁵ There is no doubt that Locke would have been a potent adversary of homosexuality if he had lived among us in the twenty-first century.

*Liberty as an Attribute of the Mind: In Essay*⁴⁶ Locke starts by analyzing “freedom” and its relationship with the “will” by assessing different boundaries for both. He mentions that there are merely some ideas of the mind that humankind can pursue, and there are other faculties people have no freedom in selection (i.e., pain) or avoid them together (i.e., enjoyment). His conclusion is that freedom and will are not of one essence to belong to each other's categories; each however enjoys separate powers, or attributes of substances, even sometimes, act like directly contrasting entities; but at the same time, people think they intend their own will, when they are free to do so, which is merely a lingual preference that cannot reveal truth by itself.⁴⁷

Will is nothing but one power or ability, and freedom another power or ability: so that to ask, whether the will has freedom, is to ask whether one power has another power, one ability another ability.⁴⁸

Then freedom is the power or ability to act freely, by the existence or nonexistence of an act based on volition; although will is an ability to prefer or choose not to act it out.⁴⁹ It is not the will that is supposed to be free; it must be the people who are free or not.⁵⁰ Only people with rational minds can be free, Locke says, with “no thought, no volition, no will” there is also no liberty or freedom.⁵¹ In Locke's opinion, neither will nor can volition bear freedom by itself. Consequently, it is not possible to judge one's freedom on accounts of will only. People are free to will, but at the same time, they can have desires, which again is not the will or freedom but another “distinct act of the mind.”⁵² One of the main conclusions Locke makes upon such a distinction is to associate liberty with a choice one may embrace for herself; otherwise, she will lose a bit of her liberty and let others make choices for her instead.⁵³ The free person is called free in the Lockean impression of the term when he/she is able to do, contrary to what he/she has done.⁵⁴ Thus, according to Locke, freedom as an agent of humankind, the rational being, is an attribute of the mind, which, in any situation of given numerical choices, empowers the person for a choice while completely able to aim for the contrary. In similar words, freedom is a quality of a rational being and is an attribute that stems from the mind of the rational being. It allows a person to have several possibilities and accordingly act on the more favorable one.

⁴⁴Locke, *The First Treatise...*, §59; Shapiro, “John Locke's Democratic Theory”, 318-319.

⁴⁵Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume VI*, 35.

⁴⁶*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Book II.

⁴⁷Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume I*, 243-248.

⁴⁸Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume I*, 244-245.

⁴⁹Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume I*, 245-248.

⁵⁰Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume I*, 246.

⁵¹Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume I*, 240-241; Vere Chappell, “Locke on the Freedom of the Will,” in *Locke's Philosophy: Content and Context*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 103.

⁵²Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume I*, 251; Chappell, 113.

⁵³Locke, *The Works of John Locke ... Volume I*, 268.

⁵⁴Chappell, “Locke on the Freedom of the Will,” 101.



Thus, human beings as intelligent actors should be free within the context and boundaries of Natural Law. A non-despotic government grants liberties within such boundaries. Without firm laws, there will be no freedom to act. Locke's concept of liberty is deeply interwoven with his view of a moral person as a free agent. He sees freedom not just as a political or societal construct but as an intrinsic attribute of humanity, linked to the capacity for self-determination and moral judgment. This perspective informs his broader philosophical framework, which holds that personal liberty is essential for the pursuit of knowledge and truth. In terms of religious tolerance, Locke argued that true liberty includes the right to religious freedom, which reflected his belief in the separation of church and state. By advocating religious tolerance, Locke aims to create a society where individuals can freely pursue their beliefs without fear of oppression, thus fostering a more just and enlightened community. This nuanced understanding of liberty underscores its fundamental role in Locke's vision of a free and moral society.

John Locke championed the cause of freedom of thought and expression, believing it is essential to individual and societal progress. He argued that true knowledge and growth stem from the free exchange of ideas and the ability to question established norms. In his work *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke emphasizes the importance of allowing individuals the liberty to think, discuss, and debate without fear of repression. This freedom is integral to Locke's broader philosophy of government and human rights, advocating for a society where individuals can express their beliefs openly. For Locke, freedom of thought and expression is not merely a personal right but a cornerstone of a free and just society. This aspect of Locke's thought retains significant relevance for contemporary discourse.

John Stuart Mill's Period and His Understanding of Liberty

There is a century gap between John Locke's death and John Stuart Mill's birth. Both philosophers were influential modern British thinkers of the liberal tradition. John Stuart Mill was born in the nineteenth century. England of the time was more stable in terms of political regime and social prosperity. The long-reigned monarch of the century has a fame among English men and women that continues to this date. Queen Victoria transformed England from an ordinary agrarian society into a respected industrial giant and superpower with half the world as its colony. The political and religious issues that concerned Locke a century earlier were almost nonexistent among the philosophers of Victorian England.

Liberals of the time had already walked away from Locke on several matters regarding governance, majority rule, and religious fundamentalism. For instance, Mill was against both uncontrolled democracy and tyrannical majority rule.⁵⁵ Although an opponent of extreme empiricism, Mill acknowledged himself as a follower of Locke's school of liberal thought.⁵⁶ Mill was with no doubt a strong advocate of liberty and, at the same time, a non-religious philosopher of utilitarian tradition. Moreover, he was tagged as a British feminist because of his overwhelming attempts, in both parliamentary activities and in his writings, to support equal rights for women. His defense of equal rights for women was astonishing for his time but rather revolutionary. According to Mill, women should be free in all aspects of their lives, in marriage, in work, in beliefs and thoughts, and in any other action comparable to those of men equally without considering any difference of nature at all.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Mill's fame, especially among philosophers, was derived from his theory of Utilitarianism, or the "Happiness theory".⁵⁸ Notable British Utilitarian philosopher

⁵⁵Henry M. Magid, "John Stuart Mill," *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 794 & 796.

⁵⁶Alan Ryan, *John Stuart Mill* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), xviii.

⁵⁷Peter Nicholson, "The Reception and Early Reputation of Mill's Political Thought," *The Cambridge Companion to Mill*, ed. John Skorupski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 471.

⁵⁸John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works – Volume X – Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 207.



and contemporary to Mill, Henry Sidgwick, has announced him as “the best philosophical writer ... England has produced since Hume”.⁵⁹

John Stuart Mill was born in the family of a Utilitarian philosopher, James Mill, who had a famous radical reformer friend, Jeremy Bentham. He was raised based on his educational insights at home and did not attend school. At the age of three, he began to learn Greek. At twelve, he started to learn logic, and a few years later, he became an expert in the political20s. In his early twenties, as we know from his famous *autobiography*, he faced two years of deep depression and a nervous breakdown.⁶⁰ It might be due to his father's rough educational syllabus and peculiar conditions of study; however, Mill experienced fame and responsibility much earlier on average than the rest of the cultural elite: publishing newspaper and journal articles in his teenage years and employment by the East India Company. Additionally, Mill's extraordinary early education and the notable environment in which he grew up certainly played a role in enabling him to create his own “systematic philosophy”.⁶¹

Again, we can distinguish between two attempts of the philosopher to consider his notion of concern within two approaches: an inner consideration of the issue, by faculties of the senses and the mind, and an outer consideration, by observation of the agent in society. First, we consider Mill's outer approach. To pursue Mill's definition of relevance mainly within political content, *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1861) are the first contexts to examine. Mill was gravely concerned about the degree to which the majority could exert influence over the minority, especially the individual.

Liberty as a means of utility: Mill was interested in the community, people, and their lives. His major contribution to political philosophy, in addition to enhancing Bentham's theory of Utilitarianism, was to safeguard freedom in a jungle of aesthetically designed individual lives, each as a work of art toward maximizing achievable happiness. The political mean, or framework, for that end, according to Mill, is representative democracy. Only in such a system can the interests of the governed can be fulfilled in the best manner. Mill strongly believed that only in a free society can a civilization can begin to emerge, and within such a civilization, pursuing higher pleasures for utilitarian aims is possible.⁶² Without freedom, there would be no rational decision-making. Thus, according to Mill, in making a society flourish, community needs freedom, and for freedom, there should be a great extent of individuality. He deliberately uses freedom for his higher aim: the moral standard of life is achievable by utilitarian standards, and such standards are in conformity with any action, personal or communal, that can bring forth the greatest happiness to the greatest number of people. Respectively, Mill proposes to legitimate governments the establishment of a moral educational system among the masses for them to have their own decisions as morally binding, a “progressive being” seeking intellectual pleasures.⁶³

Mill's concept of liberty was balanced by the influence of the majority. As long as individuals—excluding children, mentally ill and non-civilized - are free of the majority's dictates of thought, belief and action—or in Tocqueville's terms very delightful for Mill: “the tyranny of the majority” - they can be considered truly free.⁶⁴ In the first two chapters of *On Liberty*, Mill's points on the topic:

⁵⁹Nicholson, “The Reception,” 466.

⁶⁰John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works – Volume I – Autobiography and Literary Essays* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1981), Chapter V; Stefan Collini, *On Liberty; with, The Subjection of Women and, Chapters on Socialism by John Stuart Mill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ix.

⁶¹Ryan, “John Stuart Mill” xi.

⁶²Magid, “John Stuart Mill,” 789.

⁶³Mill, *Collected Works – Volume X*, 223-226; Magid, 790.

⁶⁴Magid, “John Stuart Mill,” 798; John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works – Volume XVIII - Essays on Politics and Society*, 219.



Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign... If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.⁶⁵

Freedom of thought and belief should have no restriction, and it is wise to treat them as absolutes; however, limits must exist to the freedom of action. There would be no harm from opinions, while the usefulness of opinions is a matter of opinions, but actions, or even inactions, can occasionally lead to serious social damage.⁶⁶ That is why there should be barriers regarding the latter for the sake of individual rights and liberties. Limits to human action/inaction come in handy when the interests of others are concerned; otherwise, individuals have to be free of intervention even in their actions/inactions that have attitudes toward the self. Yet, it seems not very wise to omit opinions from the range of possible harm indicators. Opinions can also harm society in several different ways. As an example, opinions disseminated without critical evaluation can contribute to the expulsion of misinformation, leading to social polarization. In addition, certain opinions can justify harmful actions.

Mill was after discovering and governing “moral coercion” and “legal penalties” society normally imposes on individuals.⁶⁷ His “liberty principle”⁶⁸ or “harm principle” allows social intervention merely on the basis of harm prevention, not for the good of the individual.⁶⁹ Whenever harm is involved, individual autonomy and liberty may be violated by control or violence; otherwise, individual liberty must be protected.⁷⁰ The duty of the law should be the protection of the individual not from themselves but from others.⁷¹ This acts as a safeguard against the despotism of the majority in respect of minorities and individuals. Mill mentioned that paternalistic intervention is not justified toward adults.⁷² Only in the case of a child's education and protection do paternal attitudes have legitimate holds. In general, in certain portions of an individual's life, any intervention, no matter paternalistic or otherwise, is ruled out by Mill.⁷³ Serious harm caused by violation of the rules of customary morality is a general rule of thumb to justify intervention, Mill states.⁷⁴ Keeping in mind that customary morality is different from the possible universal morality or any official ethics of a society, collective opinion surely has limits regarding individuals.

Therefore, “freedom of opinion, and freedom of expression of opinion” is the key to Mill's formulation of political and social liberty.⁷⁵ Such liberty should be granted to individuals to enjoy a flourishing and progressive society as a whole. Now, Mill clearly states that liberty is not an end in itself but rather a means toward a higher end, that is, happiness achieved through individuality. Nonetheless, Mill's happiness is not just “well-being” as it was according to his father and Bentham; it is happiness through “self-development”

⁶⁵Mill, *Collected Works – Volume XVIII*, 224-229.

⁶⁶Magid, “John Stuart Mill,” 799; Mill, *Collected Works – Volume XVIII*, 233.

⁶⁷Mill, *Collected Works – Volume XVIII*, 223; Roger Crisp, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism* (London: Routledge, 2006), 174.

⁶⁸Despite the same meaning, the term has been coined by scholars and philosophers while only the “principle of liberty” has been used by Mill twice in chapter 4 of *On Liberty*.

⁶⁹Crisp, 174; L.W. Sumner, “Mill's Theory of Rights,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism*, ed. Henry R. West (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 195.

⁷⁰Sumner, “Mill's Theory of Rights”.

⁷¹Crisp, “Mill's Theory of Rights,” 179.

⁷²Crisp, “Mill's Theory of Rights,” 175.

⁷³Crisp, “Mill's Theory of Rights,” 176.

⁷⁴Mill, *Collected Works – Volume XVIII*, 276-291; Crisp, 181.

⁷⁵Mill, *Collected Works – Volume XVIII*, 257-258.

⁷⁶Fred Wilson, “John Stuart Mill,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Last modified on Spring 2014, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/mill/>; Nicholson, 488.



and “individuality”.⁷⁶ Despite being problematical and even fallacious among a few philosophers, the following lines define what Mill has to say regarding his higher utilitarian end in life in *Utilitarianism*:

Happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all other things being only desirable as means to that end.⁷⁷

Therefore, the rightness of any action can be directly measured by the ability to bring happiness to humankind. Mill indicates that individuals should be free in their lives to make the best moral decisions, and when harm is not concerned, they must have almost absolute law-binding liberty and rightful independence.⁷⁸

Mill's brilliant idea of democracy emphasizes the integration of individual freedom within a democratic framework. For a democracy to truly flourish, it must protect and nurture the liberties of its citizens, allowing them to express their opinions freely and participate actively in governance. Mill's advocacy for free speech and the protection of minority rights was revolutionary for his time, highlighting that a vibrant democracy relies not just on the rule of the majority but also on the inclusion and respect for diverse voices. By linking democracy with freedom, Mill pushed for a political system that is not only just but also dynamic and responsive to the needs of all its members.

It would be very constructive to turn our attention to the epistemological understanding of the notion of liberty in Mill. In fact, his treatment of causality relies on a metaphysical construct of liberty.

(1843), Mill explores the relationship between liberty of action and necessity. Although individuals are constrained by their character, which suggests a form of determinism, this does not negate their freedom of action. People make choices that are free of these character constraints and act in ways that best suit their individual boundaries. The choices made are free from the constraints that are in place. They are free to act in several ways best suited to their character boundaries. According to Mill, our actions are not only freely chosen but also to the contrary causally determined, surprisingly.⁷⁹ Mill accounts for the compatibility of “Free Will” and “Determinism”.⁸⁰ For Mill, causation is not altogether connected with compulsion.⁸¹ Out of certain causes, some effects follow and can determine nothing more than a tiny portion of the agent's motives. The agent's desire to act primarily results from their own will. Predictability can also step in regarding the motives of other agents.⁸² Respectively, we can say, for Mill, necessity is part of freedom and not a constraint to it.⁸³ People act according to their freedom of choice, however, their choice is limited, and over time, it becomes more precise and less random.⁸⁴ In similar words, Mill sees necessity as an integral part of freedom, not a limitation. People act according to their freedom of choice, although their choices become more precise and less random over time. For Mill, this precision in decision-making within the framework of determinism is what truly defines the interplay between liberty and necessity.

However, it is not altogether clear how freedom of choice can be combined with the determinism of character. Well, Mill would say then that freedom has nothing to do with the absence of causation but rather

⁷⁷Mill, *Collected Works – Volume X*, 234.

⁷⁸See: Sumner, 196.

⁷⁹Ryan, “John Stuart Mill” 104.

⁸⁰John Stuart Mill, *Collected Works – Volume VIII – A System of Logic...* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 839; Ryan, 105.

⁸¹Ryan, “John Stuart Mill,” 107.

⁸²Ryan, “John Stuart Mill,” 108.

⁸³Mill, *Collected Works – Volume VIII...*, 838-840; Ryan, 109.

⁸⁴Ryan, “John Stuart Mill” 110.

that the absence of coercion determines the essence of a free act.⁸⁵ Mill believes freedom is not about escaping causation. Instead, it is about the absence of coercion. This means that our actions can still be influenced by causes, but as long as external forces do not coerce them, they remain truly free.

A Comparison

There are a few similarities, as well as differences regarding the definition and practicality of the term “liberty” in the political philosophy of John Locke with that of John Stuart Mill.

We may say they were both representatives of Liberalism in its two different phases of development. Mill was also Locke's follower in experimental school, but with a small deviation from Locke's all-inclusive empiricism, he made a big jump forward. Mill's method of induction stands between our sensual knowledge and pure experience. Locke believed that all our knowledge was derived from direct experience, while Mill believed that human knowledge is only an inductive inference of direct experience.

Locke believed in a widespread explanation of liberty, mainly communal in nature and derived from the notion of Natural Law; while Mill had a specific and much-narrowed definition of liberty in mind aimed at the individual's micro level in society based on ethical justifications. For comparison, we can say Mill was more liberal and democratic than Locke was. Locke began to build up the fundamentals of Liberalism; that is why his writings on the topic are broad and sometimes a little obscure. Mill did not feel like starting from the basics to specifics. He saw nothing wrong with the general picture of a liberal society except when an individual fell within the boundaries of the minority. For Mill, Locke defined liberty for the majority, and it was time to re-sketch it for the minority. In fact, such a notion and continuum of majority-minority was not present in the political concerns of Locke's era; however, the closest understanding regarding toleration was that Locke spent a lot of effort in constructing his liberal political philosophy around the acceptance of others, but not all, merely some certain groups. These specific groups left liberal democratic thinkers like Mill to shed light on their destiny.

It is not clear whether Locke uses his account of liberty to reach a higher aim in life rather than serving an understanding of religious advancement and opposing tyrannical interpretations of divine benevolence and benignity toward humankind, but Mill clearly links liberty with happiness and his Utilitarianism without apparent religious presuppositions. Locke was concerned about the establishment of a democratic, liberal in nature, property preserving, and constitutional government, while Mill was thinking just about ways to make such an intellectually accepted government more liberal and democratic from a minority point of view.

In Locke's period, religion's presence in society was over one's justification, preference, or even logical analysis. It was more sacred and people were more religious as a comparison with Mill's era, when different antagonisms against Christianity from various fields of study had already gained momentum. Locke was notably progressive for his time, especially in his work *Two Treatises*. He argued that women should not be subjected to men or seen as property of their husbands, directly opposing Filmer's scriptural claims. Locke also introduced the term “parental power” instead of “paternal power”, challenging the traditional fatherly authority in the home. While Locke's views on gender equality may not be as modern as Mill's, he was quite avant-garde for his era and laid important groundwork for future advancements in the realm of gender equality. As for Mill, on the other hand, not only is it not acceptable to exclude women from social activities and politics, but also not to be equal with men in rights and liberties is not satisfactory due to a lack of grounds in “customary morality” as well.

⁸⁵Ryan, “John Stuart Mill” 125.



In a sense, both philosophers were systematically dividing the volition of freedom from other commonly believed relations and causes. For Locke, freedom as an attribute of the mind is not the same as will, which is another attribute of the mind. Therefore, freedom has nothing to do with a playground of willful acts. For Mill, freedom as an intention in mind has nothing to do with causal relations. In fact, he mentions that a causal relation does not determine the state of freedom at all. In other words, Locke subtracted freedom from will and Mill did the same thing regarding determinism. All together, they are saying will is not freedom; at the same time, determinism has nothing to do with freedom.

Liberty is a precious entity. John Locke would say people without it could not even recognize their deity in the best manner, get enough knowledge of life, and be better human beings for the overall society; no less to say, they would not be able to establish the best government for themselves. Respectively, John Locke believes that without liberty a civilization would be doomed. John Stuart Mill however did not object to Locke on accounts of liberty but proposed additions to that. Furthermore, liberty allows people to make firmer choices with better decisions in their own private lives and become happier and more ethical agents overall. It was the point, I believe, that Mill wanted to promote in his society and era.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy that the metaphysical understanding of freedom as an attribute of the mind was similar between both philosophers. The concept of liberty has various definitions and practical implications in the political philosophies of John Locke and John Stuart Mill. Representing different phases of Liberalism, Mill builds on and diverges from Locke's empirical foundations. Locke's broader, communal concept of liberty, derived from Natural Law, contrasts with Mill's narrower, individual-focused definition based on ethical grounds. Despite these differences, both aimed to refine and promote liberty within society, with Locke laying the groundwork and Mill advancing it to include minority rights. Their distinct but complementary perspectives highlight the evolution of liberal thought and its ongoing relevance in political discourse.

Locke, grounded in the principles of natural law, emphasizes inherent individual rights and a limited government role. He argues that individuals have natural rights to life, liberty, and property, which should be protected from arbitrary government interference. According to Locke, the primary purpose of the government is to preserve these rights, and any infringement upon them would be unjust and illegitimate. Locke's views laid the foundation for modern democratic thought, emphasizing the importance of consent and the social contract as the basis of legitimate political authority.



Mill, adopting a utilitarian approach, prioritizes the greatest happiness for the greatest number. He advocates for individual liberty as a means to promote social progress and personal fulfillment. Mill contends that freedom of thought and expression are essential for personal development and societal advancement. By allowing individuals to pursue their own paths, society benefits from a diversity of ideas and innovations. Mill's emphasis on liberty also includes a strong defense of minority rights against the potential tyranny of the majority, highlighting the importance of protecting individual freedoms within a democratic framework.

Despite their differences, both philosophers champion individual autonomy and warn against excessive government power. Their ideas have profoundly impacted liberal political thought and continue to shape contemporary debates about liberty and the role of the state.

As we navigate the complexities of the twenty-first century, the insights of Locke and Mill remain relevant. Their emphasis on individual rights, limited government, and the pursuit of happiness provides a valuable framework for addressing modern challenges and opportunities. By understanding their contributions, we can better appreciate the enduring value of liberty and work to protect it for future generations.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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