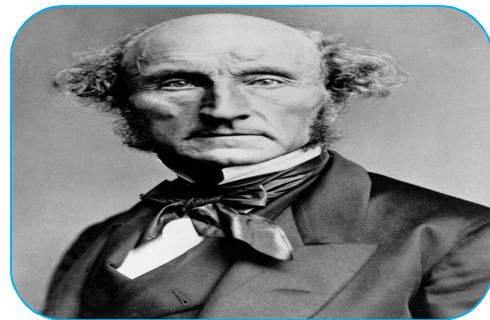




SOCIAL PRESSURE AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM: J. S. MILL'S CRITIQUE OF THE TYRANNY OF THE MAJORITY**Siddhi Nitin Kurkute****M.A. Political Science (Savitribai Phule Pune University).****1. ABSTRACT**

*Individual freedom is generally understood in terms of protection from state interference. However, individuals can also face restrictions through social expectations, public opinion and pressure to follow accepted ways of thinking and living. John Stuart Mill examines this problem in *On Liberty* (1859), where he warns that society can exercise power over individuals even without legal coercion. This paper analyses Mill's understanding of individual liberty, the tyranny of the majority and the importance of individuality. It uses a qualitative, text-based methodology, drawing primarily on *On Liberty* and selected secondary scholarship. The paper argues that social pressure can restrict freedom by discouraging independent judgment and making conformity appear necessary for social acceptance. Mill's defence of individuality provides an important way to understand this form of domination. However, his approach also raises questions about how social inequality affects people's ability to exercise their freedom. The paper concludes that protecting individual liberty requires more than limiting state power. It also requires a social environment in which people can express different opinions and make personal choices without facing unreasonable pressure to conform.*



2. KEYWORDS: Individual liberty; social pressure; tyranny of the majority; individuality; public opinion; harm principle; J. S. Mill.

3. INTRODUCTION

Freedom is an important concept in liberal political thought. It concerns the ability of individuals to think, express opinions and make decisions about their lives. In political theory, discussions of freedom often focus on the limits of state power. However, the absence of government interference does not necessarily mean that individuals can exercise their freedom without difficulty. Social expectations, public opinion and the fear of disapproval can also influence personal choices.

John Stuart Mill addresses this problem in his influential work *On Liberty*, published in 1859. Mill argues that the protection of individual freedom requires attention not only to political authority but also to the power exercised by society. A majority can influence the lives of individuals through accepted customs, moral judgments and expectations of conformity. Such influence can become restrictive even when it does not take the form of law or physical force.

Mill's concern is particularly important because social pressure may appear natural or acceptable to those who support it. When a particular way of thinking or living becomes widely accepted, people who disagree may be treated as unreasonable or unacceptable. Individuals may then

avoid expressing their views or making independent choices because they fear criticism, isolation or rejection.

Mill describes this danger through his discussion of the tyranny of the majority. His argument is that democratic societies must protect individuals not only against the misuse of political authority but also against excessive social control. Freedom of thought, discussion and individuality are essential because they allow people to question established beliefs and develop their own capacities.

This paper examines how social pressure restricts individual freedom in Mill's political thought and evaluates the strengths and limitations of his approach. It argues that Mill provides a valuable framework for understanding social coercion, although his account requires further examination of the unequal social conditions that influence people's ability to exercise their freedom.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does social pressure restrict individual freedom in Mill's political thought, and how far does his conception of liberty address this form of coercion?
2. How does the tyranny of the majority differ from direct state coercion?
3. Why does Mill consider individuality and independent judgment necessary for human development?
4. What are the strengths and limitations of Mill's approach to social pressure?

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine Mill's conception of individual liberty and the harm principle.
2. To explain how social conventions, public opinion and conformity can restrict individual freedom.
3. To analyse the relationship between individuality and resistance to social pressure.
4. To critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of Mill's approach to social coercion.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper uses a qualitative, text-based research methodology. Its primary source is John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, particularly Chapters I, II and III, which discuss individual liberty, freedom of thought and discussion, and individuality.

The study also draws on secondary scholarship by John Gray, Joseph Hamburger and Jennie C. Ikuta. These works help explain different interpretations of Mill's arguments and provide a basis for critical evaluation.

Conceptual analysis and textual interpretation are the main methods employed. The paper examines Mill's central concepts, considers their relationship with one another, and evaluates their implications for individual freedom. It does not use interviews, surveys or fieldwork.

7. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Principal hypothesis: Social pressure can restrict individual freedom even in the absence of direct state coercion, and Mill's defence of individuality provides an important framework for understanding this form of domination.

Subsidiary hypothesis: Although Mill's theory identifies the restrictive effects of social conformity, its ability to explain how unequal social conditions influence the exercise of individual freedom requires critical examination.

These propositions are evaluated through the analysis of Mill's text and relevant secondary scholarship.

8. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Mill's *On Liberty* remains an important work in liberal political theory because it examines the conditions under which individuals should be protected from interference by the state and society. Its central themes include freedom of thought, individuality, the harm principle and the dangers of social

conformity. However, scholars differ in their interpretations of the relationship between liberty and social authority in Mill's philosophy.

Gray (1996) examines the philosophical foundations of Mill's defence of liberty, including the relationship between individuality, happiness and autonomy. His interpretation helps explain why freedom matters beyond the immediate satisfaction of individual preferences. Mill values the development of human capacities and the ability to choose among different ways of living. Gray also raises broader questions about the foundations and limitations of Millian liberalism.

Hamburger (1999) offers a more critical interpretation. By examining *On Liberty* alongside Mill's other writings, he argues that Mill's commitment to liberty existed alongside a strong interest in moral and cultural reform. Hamburger's analysis challenges the simple view of Mill as an unconditional defender of individual freedom. His work is relevant because it raises the question of whether efforts to improve society can themselves create new forms of pressure or control.

Ikuta (2020) directly examines conformity in Mill's political thought. She argues that social tyranny has both external and internal dimensions. External pressure occurs when people use social penalties to force others to follow accepted customs. Internal conformity occurs when individuals restrict their own independence by accepting prevailing expectations. Ikuta connects resistance to conformity with Mill's defence of individuality.

These interpretations demonstrate that social pressure and conformity are established subjects within scholarship on Mill. Therefore, this paper does not claim that the subject has been neglected. Instead, it brings together the distinction between external social penalties and internalised conformity to examine a focused question: how does social pressure affect the practical exercise of individual freedom, and what does Mill's theory leave unresolved?

9. MAIN DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

9.1. Mill's Understanding of Individual Liberty

Mill's defence of liberty begins with a concern about the limits of legitimate interference. In *On Liberty*, he argues that individuals should generally be free to think, speak and act as they choose when their conduct does not harm others in a way that justifies interference. This position is commonly associated with the harm principle.

The harm principle does not mean that individuals can do anything without consequences. Mill distinguishes between actions that primarily concern the individual and actions that violate obligations towards others. Where conduct causes harm to others or breaches a legitimate obligation, there may be grounds for intervention. However, the mere fact that other people dislike an individual's choices does not automatically justify coercion (Mill, 1859/1978).

This distinction is important because societies often treat disagreement as a reason to restrict freedom. People may disapprove of another person's opinions, lifestyle or decisions and assume that their disapproval gives them the right to interfere. Mill challenges this assumption. Disagreement, offence and moral disapproval are not necessarily equivalent to harm.

Mill's defence of liberty is also connected with his understanding of human development. Individuals learn through experience, reflection and the opportunity to make choices. If society constantly decides how people should live, individuals lose opportunities to develop their judgment.

Freedom, therefore, is not simply the absence of restrictions. It also creates space for people to examine their beliefs, learn from mistakes and develop their capacities. Mill's argument gives individuality a central place in political life because a society that suppresses difference also limits opportunities for human development.

9.2. The Tyranny of the Majority and the Power of Society

Mill's discussion of the tyranny of the majority extends the problem of power beyond the state. In a democracy, political decisions are often made according to the preferences of the majority.

Although majority rule is an important democratic principle, Mill warns that majority opinion should not have unlimited authority over individual lives.

The danger arises when the preferences of the majority become standards that everyone is expected to follow. A majority may influence public institutions, but it can also exercise power through customs, social expectations and judgments about acceptable behaviour. Individuals who depart from these expectations may face ridicule, criticism or exclusion.

Social tyranny differs from state coercion in its methods. A government may restrict conduct through laws, regulations or official punishment. Society may achieve a similar effect through informal means. People may be discouraged from expressing an unpopular opinion because they fear losing friends, social standing or acceptance within their community.

These pressures do not always involve deliberate attempts to control others. People may sincerely believe that their customs and opinions are correct. Nevertheless, their certainty can make it difficult for alternative views to receive a fair hearing.

Mill's argument is not that majority opinion is always wrong. Social customs may contain valuable experience, and public criticism can sometimes be justified. The problem begins when prevailing opinion is treated as unquestionable and individuals are pressured to conform without sufficient consideration of their own circumstances.

This creates a serious challenge for democracy. Political participation alone cannot guarantee individual liberty if people are afraid to question dominant beliefs. A democratic society must therefore consider both the distribution of political power and the informal social forces that influence how people think and behave.

9.3. Social Conformity and the Loss of Individuality

Mill considers individuality essential because human beings differ in their abilities, interests, experiences and ways of understanding the world. A single model of life cannot necessarily serve everyone equally well. Individuals need opportunities to explore their capacities and make choices that reflect their own judgment.

In Chapter III of *On Liberty*, Mill examines individuality as an important element of well-being. He argues that people should not merely follow established customs because those customs are widely accepted. They should consider whether a particular way of living suits their own circumstances and values.

Conformity becomes a problem when people stop examining their choices and accept prevailing expectations simply because questioning them is uncomfortable. For example, an individual may choose a particular profession, express a particular opinion or follow a particular lifestyle mainly to avoid criticism. The choice may appear voluntary, but the fear of social rejection has significantly influenced it.

Mill's concern is not that everyone must behave differently. Independent judgment does not require rejecting every tradition or social convention. A person may freely choose to follow a custom after considering its value. The important distinction is between following a practice through reflection and following it because deviation is socially unacceptable.

Individuality also benefits society. Different experiences and opinions allow people to question established assumptions and discover better ways of understanding social problems. If everyone is expected to think alike, mistakes may remain unchallenged and valuable alternatives may never be considered.

Mill therefore connects individual freedom with social progress. A society that tolerates different ways of living creates opportunities for learning and improvement. By contrast, excessive conformity can make social life rigid and discourage independent thought.

9.4. External Social Pressure and Internalised Conformity

A useful way to examine Mill's argument is to distinguish between external social pressure and internalised conformity. This distinction develops his discussion of social tyranny; it should not be treated as a separate psychological theory explicitly formulated by Mill.

External social pressure occurs when people face criticism, ridicule, exclusion or other social penalties because they do not follow accepted expectations. Such penalties can influence behaviour even when no law requires conformity. An individual may remain silent in a discussion, hide a personal preference or avoid expressing disagreement because the expected social cost appears too high.

Internalised conformity occurs when individuals begin to accept prevailing expectations as standards they should follow, even when nobody directly pressures them. They may judge their own choices negatively because those choices differ from what their community considers normal.

These two forms of pressure can reinforce each other. When people repeatedly encounter criticism for departing from social expectations, they may gradually begin to restrict themselves. At the same time, individuals who strongly believe that everyone should follow accepted customs may impose those expectations on others.

Ikuta (2020) highlights this relationship in her interpretation of Mill. She argues that conformity involves both the social penalties imposed on people who differ and the restriction of individuals' own capacity for independent judgment.

This interpretation helps explain why freedom can be difficult to exercise even when formal rights exist. A person may legally possess the freedom to express an opinion but still feel unable to do so because of the expected consequences. Formal permission does not always provide the confidence or social conditions necessary to use that freedom.

However, not every influence on personal choice amounts to coercion. People naturally learn from families, communities and social experiences. Advice, persuasion and criticism can help individuals make better decisions. The concern arises when these influences become so restrictive that people cannot reasonably question expectations or make independent choices without facing disproportionate social penalties.

Mill's approach helps identify this danger. Nevertheless, determining the boundary between legitimate social influence and coercive conformity remains difficult. His theory provides a basis for examining the problem rather than a simple rule for resolving every case.

9.5. Contemporary Relevance of Mill's Argument

Mill's discussion of social tyranny remains useful for examining contemporary social life. His argument can be applied to situations in which people have formal freedom but face pressure to follow dominant expectations.

Consider the pressure individuals may experience when making decisions about education, careers, relationships or personal lifestyles. Families and communities can offer valuable guidance, but expectations may become restrictive when one choice is treated as the only respectable option. Individuals may then make decisions primarily to avoid disapproval rather than because they consider those decisions suitable for themselves.

The same issue arises in public discussion. People may hesitate to express an unpopular opinion when they fear ridicule or exclusion. Online spaces can intensify this problem because criticism can become highly visible and may continue long after an original statement is made. However, online criticism is not automatically an attack on freedom. Criticism can be legitimate, especially when it responds to harmful conduct or challenges an argument. The important question is whether social reactions discourage open discussion through unreasonable pressure or punishment.

Mill's defence of freedom of expression offers a way to examine these situations. In Chapter II of *On Liberty*, he argues that open discussion matters because people can be mistaken and because even an incorrect opinion may contain some truth or force accepted beliefs to be examined more carefully.

His argument does not require society to treat every opinion as equally sound. Instead, it encourages people to distinguish between answering an argument and suppressing the person who expresses it. This distinction is valuable wherever social approval becomes a condition for participation in public discussion.

These examples illustrate the continuing relevance of Mill's theory, but they do not establish that every contemporary social conflict can be explained through his ideas. Present-day social pressures operate under different technological and institutional conditions. Mill's work provides a useful conceptual framework, not a complete explanation of every modern problem.

9.6. Critical Evaluation: Strengths and Limitations of Mill's Approach

One of the main strengths of Mill's theory is its recognition that freedom can be restricted without direct state intervention. Political institutions may protect individual rights while social expectations still discourage people from exercising them. Mill's discussion of social tyranny brings this less visible form of power into political analysis.

A second strength is his emphasis on individuality. Mill does not defend freedom merely because individuals prefer different things. He also considers the development of judgment, character and human capacities important. His argument therefore connects personal liberty with the wider benefits of a society that permits different experiences and opinions.

However, Mill's approach also raises important questions. One limitation concerns the unequal social conditions under which individuals exercise freedom. People may formally possess the same rights but face very different consequences when they challenge social expectations. An individual with financial independence or a supportive social network may be better able to resist disapproval than someone who depends heavily on family or community support.

This observation does not make Mill's argument irrelevant. Rather, it suggests that the practical exercise of liberty depends partly on the circumstances in which choices are made. A purely formal understanding of freedom may overlook the unequal costs associated with exercising it.

Gray (1996) raises broader questions about the foundations and limitations of Millian liberalism, while Hamburger (1999) challenges the conventional interpretation of Mill as an uncomplicated defender of liberty. Hamburger's reading suggests that Mill's commitment to liberty must be considered alongside his interest in moral and cultural reform. This makes it necessary to examine whether efforts to encourage desirable forms of conduct can themselves become restrictive.

Another difficulty concerns the boundary between social pressure and legitimate criticism. Individuals are not entitled to be protected from every disagreement or negative judgment. Social relationships inevitably involve criticism, advice and the evaluation of conduct. If every expression of disapproval were treated as coercion, meaningful discussion and accountability would become difficult.

Mill's argument is most persuasive when it identifies the danger of excessive social authority rather than suggesting that society should never influence individuals. The central issue is whether social influence leaves room for independent judgment or becomes a means of enforcing conformity.

Overall, Mill offers a powerful starting point for understanding social coercion. His theory explains why formal rights alone cannot guarantee meaningful liberty. However, a fuller understanding of freedom must also consider the unequal social costs of nonconformity and the difficulty of distinguishing harmful pressure from legitimate social criticism.

10. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis supports the principal hypothesis that social pressure can restrict individual freedom even without direct state coercion. Mill's discussion of the tyranny of the majority shows that public opinion, social conventions and informal penalties can discourage individuals from expressing their views or making independent choices.

First, the study finds that the harm principle provides an important distinction between conduct that may legitimately justify interference and conduct that is merely unpopular or socially disapproved. Disagreement alone does not establish that an individual's freedom should be restricted.

Second, individuality is central to Mill's conception of liberty. Independent judgment allows people to develop their capacities, question accepted beliefs and contribute to social progress. Conformity becomes restrictive when individuals follow expectations without meaningful reflection or because they fear social punishment.

Third, external pressure and internalised conformity can reinforce each other. Social penalties may encourage people to regulate their own behaviour, while accepted expectations may lead individuals to pressure others to conform. This supports the argument that social tyranny can operate even without formal coercion.

Finally, the subsidiary hypothesis is also supported, with qualification. Mill's theory identifies an important problem, but the ability to resist social pressure may depend on a person's social and material circumstances. The distinction between coercive pressure and legitimate criticism also remains difficult to establish in every situation.

11. CONCLUSION

Mill's critique of the tyranny of the majority demonstrates that individual freedom can be threatened by society as well as by the state. Laws may protect individual rights, but social expectations, public opinion and fear of rejection can still restrict the choices people feel able to make. This is the central significance of Mill's argument.

His defence of individuality explains why freedom requires opportunities for independent thought, personal development and different ways of living. Social conformity becomes problematic when people are discouraged from questioning established beliefs or making choices that depart from prevailing expectations.

At the same time, Mill's theory should not be understood as a demand to eliminate every form of social influence. Advice, criticism and disagreement are necessary parts of social life. The challenge is to distinguish these legitimate forms of influence from pressure that makes conformity a condition of acceptance.

The analysis also shows that formal freedom does not guarantee an equal ability to exercise it. Social and material circumstances can make resistance to conformity easier for some people than for others. Mill's theory provides an important starting point for understanding this problem, although it does not resolve every question about social inequality and autonomy.

Ultimately, individual freedom requires more than protection against direct coercion. It also requires a social environment in which people can question accepted beliefs, express disagreement and make considered choices without unreasonable pressure to conform.

12. SUGGESTIONS OR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Encourage independent judgment:** Educational institutions should promote questioning, discussion and reasoned disagreement rather than treating conformity as the main sign of good conduct.
2. **Protect freedom of expression:** Public institutions and educational spaces should provide opportunities for people to express different opinions, while recognising that freedom of expression does not remove responsibility for harmful conduct.
3. **Promote tolerance of different choices:** Families and communities should recognise that people may reasonably choose different careers, lifestyles and personal priorities. Difference should not automatically be treated as a threat to social order.
4. **Distinguish criticism from coercion:** Social criticism can be legitimate, but efforts to silence people through disproportionate penalties or exclusion deserve careful scrutiny.

5. **Recognise unequal barriers to freedom:** Discussions of liberty should consider how dependence and unequal social circumstances affect people's practical ability to resist pressure and exercise their rights.

These suggestions follow from Mill's emphasis on individuality and the need to limit excessive social control.

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