Understanding Politics — Chapter 6 Student Practice Pack

Liberty, Autonomy and Individuality: Reading Mill

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About this pack

Work through Chapter 6 with *On Liberty* open. Read Mill's chapters 1, 3 and 4 in full, Berlin's 'Two Concepts of Liberty' and the Hayek sections of the chapter. Complete the worksheet, take the self-test without the book, then plan and write one essay. Answers are in the Instructor Pack, available to teaching staff from www.oxterpress.com.

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Chapter at a glance

Conception	Freedom is…	Key text	Main worry
Mill	Room for individuality, limited only to prevent harm to others	*On Liberty*	Social as well as legal tyranny
Negative liberty	Absence of interference	Berlin (1969)	Ignores resources and domination
Positive liberty	Self-mastery or collective self-government	Berlin (1969)	Coercion in the name of a 'true' self
Republican liberty	Not being subject to arbitrary power	Pettit (1997)	Domination without interference
Capabilities	What people can effectively do and be	Sen (1999)	Formal permission without real options
Hayek	Minimal coercion under general rules	Hayek (2011; 1945)	Discretionary direction and dispersed knowledge

Close-reading worksheet

Passage A: the principle

> *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. (ch. 1)*

1. List every term here that needs interpreting before the principle can be applied.
2. Why does Mill say ‘a civilised community’? Read the following paragraph of chapter 1.
3. Does the principle forbid advice, persuasion or criticism? Use the text.

Passage B: individuality

> *Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides. (ch. 3)*

> *He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. (ch. 3)*

1. What does the machine–tree contrast add to the harm principle?
2. Is Mill defending choice as such, or a particular kind of life? Consider people who value tradition.
3. How do these passages connect to ‘experiments of living’?

Passage C: the boundary

> *As soon as any part of a person’s conduct affects prejudicially the interests of others, society has jurisdiction over it. (ch. 4)*

1. Which interests count? Give one case that clearly crosses the line and one that clearly does not.
2. Mill calls some effects ‘constructive injury’ that society ‘can afford to bear’. What does he mean?
3. Does jurisdiction mean society must act? What else follows from having it?

Self-test

Allow 20 minutes and answer without the book.

1. Mill’s principle allows power over a competent adult only to:
    - A. Improve their welfare
    - B. Enforce morality
    - C. Prevent harm to others
    - D. Promote equality
2. A person’s own good is, for Mill:

- A. Not a sufficient warrant for coercion
- B. The main ground for law
- C. Irrelevant to advice
- D. Decided by the majority

3. Mill thinks social tyranny can be worse than political oppression because it:
   - A. Is enforced by courts
   - B. Is rare
   - C. Is always violent
   - D. Leaves fewer means of escape and penetrates the details of life
4. Mill's utility is:
   - A. Immediate pleasure
   - B. Utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of a progressive being
   - C. Average income
   - D. Majority preference
5. Mill compares human nature to:
   - A. A tree, not a machine
   - B. A machine, not a tree
   - C. A market
   - D. A family
6. Mill limits his doctrine to:
   - A. Citizens of Britain
   - B. Property owners
   - C. Men only
   - D. Human beings in the maturity of their faculties
7. 'Constructive injury' is harm that:
   - A. Must always be punished
   - B. Only affects the agent
   - C. Society can afford to bear for the greater good of freedom
   - D. Is caused by the state
8. Berlin's negative liberty concerns:
   - A. Self-mastery
   - B. The area within which one can act without interference by others
   - C. Democratic participation
   - D. Material resources
9. Positive liberty, for Berlin, derives from the wish to:
   - A. Be one's own master
   - B. Avoid all law
   - C. Own property
   - D. Be left alone
10. Republican liberty is:
    - A. Living in a republic
    - B. Absence of all interference

- C. Not being subject to another's uncontrolled power
- D. Voting rights

11. Sen's capability approach focuses on:
    - A. Income alone
    - B. Legal rights
    - C. Happiness
    - D. What people are effectively able to do and be
12. Hayek defines coercion as occurring when:
    - A. A law exists
    - B. One person's actions are made to serve another's will for the other's purpose
    - C. Taxes are levied
    - D. A market fails
13. Hayek's knowledge problem is that relevant knowledge is:
    - A. Secret
    - B. Held by experts
    - C. Unimportant
    - D. Dispersed, incomplete and often contradictory
14. Mill defends 'experiments of living' because:
    - A. As there should be different opinions, so there should be different experiments of living
    - B. All lives are equally good
    - C. The state should design them
    - D. They maximise wealth
15. Rawls and Hayek disagree mainly over:
    - A. Whether liberty matters
    - B. Whether markets exist
    - C. How far institutions should shape distribution
    - D. Whether democracy is legitimate

Short answers and essays

Short answers (100–150 words): (1) State the harm principle and one difficulty. (2) Distinguish advice from compulsion in Mill. (3) Explain social tyranny. (4) Distinguish negative and positive liberty. (5) How does republican liberty differ from noninterference? (6) Is poverty a constraint on liberty? (7) Explain Mill's imperial exclusion and why it matters. (8) What is Hayek's case for general rules? (9) Explain the knowledge problem. (10) How do Rawls and Hayek differ on opportunity?

Essay questions: (1) Does the harm principle provide a workable limit on coercion? (2) Can a person be unfree without anyone interfering? (3) Should poverty be understood as a constraint on liberty? (4) Do Rawls and Hayek disagree about the meaning of freedom, its conditions, or both? (5) Does Mill's defence of individuality depend on his utilitarianism? (6) Is the danger of positive liberty overstated?

What a first-class answer does: reads the harm principle with its qualifications (maturity, civilised community); distinguishes conceptions of liberty before arguing; tests them on one concrete policy; treats Hayek as a serious interlocutor, not a caricature.

Glossary

Term	Definition
Harm principle	Coercion is justified only to prevent harm to others
Self-regarding conduct	Conduct that concerns only the agent
Social tyranny	Coercion by opinion and custom
Individuality	Developing one's faculties through choice
Negative liberty	Absence of interference
Positive liberty	Being one's own master
Nondomination	Freedom from arbitrary power
Capability	What a person is effectively able to do or be
Rule of law (Hayek)	General, known rules limiting discretionary coercion