UNDERSTANDING POLITICS · CHAPTER 6

Liberty, Autonomy and Individuality

Reading Mill, with Berlin, Pettit and Hayek

Oxter Press · Teaching slides · Version 1.0, October 2026

OPENING PUZZLE

Permission without opportunity

The rule

A university removes all formal barriers to admission.

The reality

Some applicants still cannot afford to apply or attend.

Ask: are they free to attend?

> *“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.”*

Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 1

“His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant.”

> *“It practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression … enslaving the soul itself.”*

Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 1

The principle covers opinion as well as law.

MILL · INDIVIDUALITY

> *“Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model … but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides.”*

Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 3

Liberty matters because development requires choice.

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

Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 4

Interests, not feelings; and jurisdiction is not yet a decision to act.

> *“Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.”*

Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 1

Who decides who is ready for liberty?

BERLIN · TWO CONCEPTS

Negative and positive liberty

Negative

The area within which no one interferes with my activity.

Positive

The wish to be one’s own master.

Berlin’s warning: appeals to a ‘true’ self can justify coercion.

BEYOND NONINTERFERENCE

Domination without interference

The kind employer

Rarely interferes, but could dismiss at will.

The worker

Free of interference, yet dependent on goodwill.

Republican liberty asks whether power over you is controlled (Pettit, 1997).

MATERIAL CONDITIONS

What people can actually do

Formal permission

No law forbids it.

Capability

Resources, health and support make it possible (Sen, 1999).

Ask: is poverty a lack of freedom or a lack of the means to use it?

Limits on discretionary power

Coercion

One person’s actions made to serve another’s will (2011, ch. 9).

General rules

Known in advance, so people can plan.

Dispersed knowledge

No planner holds what all individuals know (1945).

SEMINAR TASK · 25 MINUTES

Is the applicant free to attend?

1. Group A answers with negative liberty and Hayek.
2. Group B answers with republican liberty.
3. Group C answers with Sen’s capabilities.

THIS WEEK’S ESSAY

Does the harm principle limit coercion workably?

Plan

Reconstruct ch. 1 with its qualifications.

Test

Press ‘everything affects others’ and Mill’s ch. 4 reply.

Judge

A filter on reasons, or a decision procedure?

1,500 words maximum · Student Pack: essay questions