The Significance Of John Stuart Mill's On Liberty

The philosophical essay, On Liberty, written by John Stuart Mill, has made a significant impact surrounding the idea of power, and how much power society should have and what is, and is not acceptable within a society. Mill was able to develop these abstract ideas during the 18th century because he had hope that the people may be able to rule themselves. He was sure that if the focus could be taken off the wars and small population and instead focus on the best interest of society as a whole, this obscure idea was in no way out of reach. His whole theory was based around the idea of Liberty. Liberty alluded to a society where the individuals were protected from arbitrary power exercised by political powers. Mill argues that “[i]f all mankind minus one were of one 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” (Mill 14). In this paper I will talk about how Mill is meticulous in the way he is able to justify his theory and explain the limitations of his theory in the works On Liberty, all that being said, I will also draw attention to how his ideology comes with certain assumptions which must be in place for this theory to make any sense whatsoever. I believe that the argument brought forward by John Stuart Mill on the topic of free speech is not only accurate, but also seamlessly coincides with the current controlling of speech in Canada.

John Stuart Mill had a very strong opinion with plenty of support to justify exactly why his idea was the best answer to the unresolved issue about the guidelines of freedom of speech. He justified his theory by explaining that there must be protection for the few people or even singular person with an opinion differing from the rest of any society. Although, it is frightening to imagine speaking up to a large group of people who have a polar opposite view, and are most likely hungry to silence an opposing thought. Having the guidelines that Mill suggested supports the individual, giving them a back bone. For example the Pro Life protestors who feel very strongly against the practice of abortion. Having protection for these groups, created by the existence of guidelines to free speech, keeps them safe from a grand number of the population with a differing opinion. Mill further justified his argument by taking the appeal away from having a complacent society. Mill stated that “All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility” (Mill 15). Mill believed that if people were accepting of new and opposing thoughts, it would allow the society to be aware and have an opportunity to challenge the current beliefs within that society, meaning the society was okay with being wrong. Put simply, John Stuart Mill was trying to open everybody's eyes to the concept that change is healthy and necessary as a society progresses. One example that perfectly demonstrates this is women in the workforce. Throughout history women were oppressed in many ways, including in the workforce. Not only were they encouraged by the government and mainly the patriarchy to stay home, but they were payed a dramatically lesser amount of money for completing the same job as a man. If one woman or a small group of women had never spoken up and against the opinion of the majority, there may still be great oppression against women today. Mill effortlessly justified how free speech is necessary and how change is nothing but something to encourage. These ideas are both tirelessly practiced today in Canada’s society.

It is clear there are limitations to what “Freedom of Speech” should look like, although there is fairly few. John Stuart Mill clearly believed that people should have the freedom to do or say whatever they would like to, he said himself that there should be “absolute freedom of opinion

and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral or theological" (Mill 10). However his train of thought abruptly stops as soon as a person or a group of people is harmed by the action in any way. Another term for this is the harm principle. The harm principle plays a significant role in Mill's ideology. Looking at the limitations Mill felt were imperative to put on free speech, it is clear this principle is existent both in his theory as well as in Canada today. It is unquestionably common courtesy to avoid harming others with speech, although it is unfortunate that there are still people who do speak in a way that is harmful to others, which results in great public outrage. One example being the negative response from the public when University of Toronto professor shared that he was against using gender neutral pronouns. The entire harm principle was derived from the principle of utility, in which states when a person is making a decision they should focus on making a decision which creates the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people.

Mill believed it was only logical to consider which choice would impact others around you, which inturn would help keep the peace because the chosen action is supported by a good number of the society. For example, if the University of Toronto Professor had kept his lips sealed on his opinion rather than spewing hatred and exclusive terminology to his students, it would not have caused such a destruction to the order. Furthermore, Mill included a piece under the harm principle which stated that no person can truly act without impacting anybody at all. Although Mill said "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign" (Mill 8), he believed it was very rare, almost unheard of, for an action made by an individual to only impact that person. This is because although people may feel isolated, leading to thoughts of suicide, no one is truly isolated. Therefore Mill believed suicide was not a compelte abomination in the eyes of society, but was a controversial topic becausse of the fact that even an act causing only harm to yourself can indirectly harm so many others. The limitations Mill believed were vital to Freedom of Speech are strongly supported by his addition of the Harm Principle. John Stuart Mill's limitations are absolutely seen in society today when it comes to the "line" which must not be crossed when speaking freely.

An assumption can be defined as a thing or event that is certain to happen even if there is a lack of proof. Mill's argument that "[i]f all mankind minus one were of one 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" (Mill 14), is dependent on the assumption that the ideas that have been silenced are good ones. Although Mill had three different cases; one being that the opinion was true, meaning it should be heard by society, another being that it is not true, so it should be used to strengthen the favoured opinion of society and the third where the opinion is partially true. I am exclusively focusing on the case where the opinion is true. Thus Mill's argument is reliant on the assumption that the unheard opinions are actually worth being heard by all of society. It is reasonable to have an opinion that is held together by an assumption of some kind. Mill is no exception, as he is a theorist who relied on just that. Just like everything else discussed in this paper, assumption is very much existent in theories in our society today. For example, there is an opinion that labelling a person who is different than the "normal" is negative and disrespectful. However, this assumes that a person would feel negatively about being singled out, although I know a great number of the LGBTQ community is proud and embracing of their differences and would love to be known for their differences.

John Stuart Mill has made great contributions to the ideology and understanding of free speech, and the boundaries in which he believes are crucial to this topic. Mill effortlessly justified why free speech is so important to society, put simply, the oppressed opinion may be a hidden

treasure, which could open a society's eyes to a new point of view. Mill certainly put an uncanny amount of time and thought into what limitations his theory were fixed to. The main limitation being that free speech must be withheld if what is being said is harmful to any individual. With theories it is inevitable that there will be assumptions, however, Mill had only one obvious assumption when studying the case where the unheard judgement is valid. John Stuart Mill's work in the text, On Liberty was eye opening and with no doubt can relate to the free speech in Canada today. Globally, there is more to speech regulation then the "Absolute princes [that] feel this complete confidence in their own opinions on nearly all subjects" (Mill 15).

Works Cited

1. Mill, John Stuart. On Liberty. J.W. Parker, 1859.