

PHILOSOPHY GROUP

Report by Elizabeth Long

What is Freedom?

This month's session looked at freedom, including freedom of speech, in particular at the ideas of John Stuart Mill from '*On Liberty*', a book that has influenced philosophers, politicians and thinkers since its publication 1859.

Before moving onto the work of Mill, we considered briefly Isaiah Berlin's notion of positive and negative freedom as outlined in his article, '*Two Concepts of Liberty*'. A simple definition of the two concepts would be that negative freedom means I can do whatever I want without interference from either governments or individuals. Positive freedom means that governments or individuals can interfere as long as it is in my best interests. Arguably this will give me more freedom in the long run. Most societies have a mixture of positive and negative freedoms.

Mill favoured negative freedom with the caveat that your freedom of action or speech should not cause harm to anyone. To understand Mill, we looked at his upbringing and the times he lived in. A solitary and intense education from his father who was a follower of Utilitarianism (the greatest happiness for the greatest number) and the fact that he was writing during the Victorian era with its lack of public health service or welfare state, meant he looked at things very differently from people writing today. His views in '*On Liberty*' came from what he saw as the restrictions placed on society by the strong social and moral values of Victorian England as well as the social intolerance.

'*On Liberty*' defended individual and minority rights as well as freedom of speech. He put forward his 'one very simple principle' that said that as long as you are not causing harm to anyone then you should be free to live your life as you see fit and to express your views. He thought that views and ideas should be challenged, in that way ideas could be defended or even modified by the challenge. He felt that this would benefit humanity in the long run by increasing knowledge.

The main criticism of Mill, particularly in terms of freedom of expression, is how harm is defined. We discussed at length what could be thought of as harmful and what just caused offence (which Mill said was acceptable), particularly in light of today's use of social media and fake news etc.

The final point to think about is the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which lists freedom of expression but, philosophically, is freedom of speech a human right?

Come and join us for stimulating thinking, with no answers! None of us is an expert, we ponder the ideas with reference to the 'Great thinkers'!

We meet on Tuesday 25th October and Tuesday 22nd November at 10am at Enterprise House to consider 'Appearance and Reality'. Contact Ruth (01325 401850 ruth@sansomfamily.org) if you might be interested, or just turn up.



There was a young man who said "God
Must find it exceedingly odd
To think that the tree
Should continue to be
When there's no one about in the quad."

Reply:

"Dear Sir: Your astonishment's odd;
I am always about in the quad.
And that's why the tree
Will continue to be
Since observed by, Yours faithfully, God."