**Question: Discuss Mill’s ideas on Liberty.**

**Answer:** A person is said to have liberty when she is able to act according to her wishes, and is able to exercise her choice without being subject to any external constraint. This requires immunity from the authority’s arbitrary powers, and this links it to the theory of law. Citizens have liberty according to what law permits them to do or not to do. In his essay ‘On Liberty,’ John Stuart Mill elaborates on all these notions of liberty.

Mill holds a negative view of liberty which implies that we need liberty to protect ourselves from undue interference of the state. It implies an area in which man can do what he likes to do without being obstructed by others. There is no agreement on how wide the area should be. But it cannot be unlimited otherwise there would be a social chaos. The area of free action must be limited by law but there must be a certain minimum area of personal freedom which should not be violated on any grounds. Mill writes, “Over himself, over his own mind and body, the individual is sovereign.” He believes that unless such an area is guaranteed to individuals, civilization cannot advance. To avoid this outcome, Mill advises minimum interference by the state. He argues that potential harm to other people is the only acceptable ground for the state to prevent me from doing whatever I want to do. Accordingly, he outlines the areas of individual liberty that should be assumed to be a basic right as long as they involve no harm to others. These include freedom of conscience, freedom of thought and opinion, freedom to publish those opinions, freedom of tastes and pursuits and freedom to associate and form unions.

Let us take the example of right to freedom of expression. Mill examines the question of whether one or more persons should be able to curtail another person’s freedom to express a divergent point of view. Mill argues that any such activity is illegitimate, no matter how radical or unpopular that individual’s viewpoint may be. A viewpoint’s popularity does not necessarily make it correct—this fact is why we must allow freedom of opinion. If we apply censorship on ideas, there will be no scope for originality or genuine moral courage. The society will be crushed by the weight of collective mediocrity.

Mill also examines whether there are instances when society can legitimately limit individual liberty, for instance whether people who hold unpopular views should be allowed to act on them without being made social outcasts or facing a legal penalty. Here his opinion is that actions cannot be as free as ideas or viewpoints, and the law must limit all actions whose implementation would harm others or be an outright nuisance. He suggests that because society offers protection to us, people in a society are obliged to behave in a certain way, and each member of society must defend and protect society and all its members from harm. In brief, society must be given power to curtail behaviour that harms others, but no more.

In summary, Mill emphasizes that individual citizens are responsible for themselves, their thoughts and feelings, and their own tastes and pursuits, while society is properly concerned only with social interests. In particular, the state is justified in limiting or controlling the conduct of individuals only when doing so is the only way to prevent them from doing harm to others by violating their rights. In every other situation, the liberty of the individual should remain inviolate.