3.5 Liberal Thinkers: John Stuart Mill and John Rawls

EDEXCEL 9PL0 · about 50 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions. Short answers may use bullet points. For levels-marked questions write a well-structured, developed response using accurate knowledge of Mill and Rawls and precise terminology. The final 30-mark essay must be answered in full sentences.

1 This question checks knowledge of Mill's view on free speech as set out in On Liberty. State Mill's view on the liberty of expression.

(Total for Question 1 is 1 mark)

2 This short item asks for a named example: give one historical policy or institution Mill supported to protect freedom of expression, with an explanation and date where possible relating to the 19th century context.

(Total for Question 2 is 4 marks)

3 This question tests knowledge of Rawls's two principles of justice in A Theory of Justice. State Rawls's two principles of justice.

(Total for Question 3 is 3 marks)

4 This question is about Mill's qualified support for democracy from On Liberty. Explain Mill's qualified support for democracy and his concern about the 'tyranny of the majority'.

(Total for Question 4 is 4 marks)

5 This question asks for a brief evaluation: give two criticisms of Rawls's original position as a method for limiting individual freedom, with concise explanation.

(Total for Question 5 is 4 marks)

6 Evaluate the extent to which John Stuart Mill and John Rawls agree on the limits of individual freedom. In your answer anchor arguments in Mill's On Liberty and Rawls's A Theory of Justice, and reach a reasoned judgement.

(Total for Question 6 is 24 marks)

7 Analyse two reasons why Mill supports individual liberty in On Liberty.

(Total for Question 7 is 10 marks)

Mark scheme · 3.5 Liberal Thinkers: John Stuart Mill and John Rawls

Question 1

states that Mill defended almost complete liberty of speech, including even offensive or false opinions, because debate helps reveal truth	**B1**

Answer: Mill defended near-complete liberty of speech, arguing that allowing offending or false views to be expressed helps test and clarify the truth.

Question 2

names a relevant 19th century example linked to Mill's context, e.g. opposition to strict press censorship or support for reforming libel law	**B1**
explains how this relates to free expression, e.g. Mill's arguments against censorship to enable debate and truth-seeking	**B1**
provides a dated or contextual detail, e.g. references to the mid 19th century reform climate or Mill's 1859 publication date	**B1**
links the example to Mill's principle such as the harm principle or developmental individualism	**B1**

Answer: Example: opposition to strict press censorship in the mid 19th century. Mill, writing in 1859, argued against censorship because open debate allows false beliefs to be challenged and truth to emerge, a position consistent with his harm principle and defence of individuality.

Question 3

states the first principle guaranteeing equal basic liberties for all	**B1**
states the second principle allowing social and economic inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged and are attached to positions open to all	**B1**
identifies the difference principle as part of the second principle	**B1**

Answer: Rawls's two principles are: (1) each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties, and (2) social and economic inequalities are acceptable only if they are to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

Question 4

identifies that Mill supported democracy as generally valuable but not absolute	**B1**
identifies Mill's concern about the tyranny of the majority suppressing individuality and minority opinion	**B1**
explains that Mill advocated checks such as strong civil liberties, representative institutions and protection for minorities	**B1**
links this to Mill's belief that democracy must be limited to protect individual development	**B1**

Answer: Mill supported representative democracy as a valuable method of government but warned it could become a tyranny of the majority. He argued for safeguards including robust civil liberties, free speech and institutional checks to protect minorities and individuality, so democracy should be tempered to preserve space for individual development.

Question 5

first criticism identified, e.g. that the original position is too abstract and detached from real social conditions	**B1**
brief explanation of that criticism, e.g. abstraction may ignore existing inequalities or cultural differences that affect justice	**B1**
second criticism identified, e.g. that the veil of ignorance ignores personal attachments and responsibilities, making its impartial choices unrealistic	**B1**
brief explanation of that criticism, e.g. critics argue people behind the veil would not accept severe limits on liberty if they cared about family or community obligations	**B1**

Answer: Two criticisms: (1) the original position is overly abstract and may ignore real world social and historical factors, so the principles chosen might be ill-suited to actual societies; (2) the veil of ignorance removes personal attachments and responsibilities, producing an unrealistic deliberator who may accept limits on freedom that real people with family ties or cultural duties would reject.

Question 6

Level 0 No relevant content.	**0**
Level 1 Basic, limited knowledge of Mill and Rawls with little or no developed analysis or evaluation. Statements may be general and unsupported by textual reference.	**1-6**
Level 2 Clear knowledge of Mill and Rawls and some developed analysis of their views on limits to freedom. Evaluation is present but may be one-sided or lacking in depth and precise textual anchors.	**7-12**
Level 3 Detailed and accurate knowledge of both thinkers used to construct a sustained analysis comparing their justifications for limits on freedom, with balanced evaluation and some judgement.	**13-18**
Level 4 Authoritative, precise and comprehensive analysis and evaluation of Mill and Rawls that directly compares their accounts of permissible limits on freedom, uses detailed textual and conceptual evidence, engages with counterarguments and reaches a clearly argued, balanced and original judgement.	**19-24**

Indicative content:

- Agreement point: both thinkers accept that individual freedom is not absolute and that some limits can be justified. Mill allows interference to prevent harm to others. Rawls allows limits to secure a just basic structure and to permit inequalities only if they benefit the least advantaged.
- Agreement development: both seek impartial justification. Mill builds an ethical utilitarian defence that protects individuality to promote general welfare, while Rawls uses the original position as a form of contractualist impartiality yielding principles that can limit liberty for fairness.
- Disagreement point: Mill prioritises protection of individuality and free expression, resisting state interference except to prevent harm, and is sceptical of broad redistributive demands that excessively limit personal liberty. Rawls, by contrast, can justify far-reaching restrictions on economic freedom through the difference principle and institutional design chosen behind the veil of ignorance.
- Disagreement development: show examples, e.g. Mill would oppose paternalistic laws that limit adult self-regarding behaviour even if such choices are harmful to the person, whereas Rawls might endorse redistribution via taxation that limits some economic freedoms because it improves the position of the worst off, chosen by agents who do not know their future place.
- Methodological contrast: Mill grounds limits in utilitarian reasoning and the intrinsic value of individuality, while Rawls grounds limits in a deontic contractualist framework that privileges justice as fairness, so their normative bases lead to different practical conclusions when liberty conflicts with distributive justice.
- Tension over democracy and majorities: Mill fears the tyranny of the majority and defends civil liberties to protect minorities; Rawls also protects basic liberties as inviolable in his first principle, so there is common ground in protecting certain liberties from majority infringement, though Rawls places basic liberties at the top of a lexical ordering which constrains possible redistributive measures only to those that respect basic liberties.
- Evaluation of limits: assess whether Mill's harm principle gives clearer guidance in everyday cases than Rawls's more structural principles. Consider critiques such as vagueness in defining harm for Mill, and Rawlsian abstraction and potential practical difficulties in applying the difference principle.
- Judgement: a balanced conclusion might argue Mill and Rawls agree at a general level that liberty needs principled limits and both protect core liberties, but they differ significantly in scope and justification. Rawls permits institutional constraints for distributive justice that Mill would resist, while Mill gives stronger protection to individual autonomy in self-regarding matters. The extent of agreement is therefore limited: they converge on protecting basic civil liberties but diverge on economic limits and the role of redistribution.

Question 7

Level 1 Basic points about Mill's support for liberty with limited development and little link to evidence or analysis. **1-3**

Level 2 Clear explanation of two reasons with some analysis and reference to Mill's text or examples, but lacking depth or full comparison of the reasons' significance. **4-6**

Level 3 Detailed analysis of two distinct reasons, using accurate knowledge of Mill's harm principle, developmental individualism or free speech arguments, with evaluation of their strengths and implications. **7-10**

Indicative content:

- Reason 1, the harm principle: Mill argues liberty should only be restricted to prevent harm to others; analysis might explain how this protects individuals from unwarranted state or social interference, while noting limits such as defining 'harm' in contested ways.
- Reason 1 development: show how the harm principle protects a sphere for personal choice, and discuss objections, for example that some social actions cause indirect harm or that public moral standards might justify limits.
- Reason 2, developmental individualism: Mill values liberty because it allows individuals to cultivate character, moral capacities and creativity; analysis could explain how individuality benefits both the person and society by encouraging progress.
- Reason 2 development: consider tensions, for example when individual development conflicts with social welfare or when some choices might damage the individual without harming others, raising questions about paternalism.
- Cross reason evaluation: compare the two reasons, for example the harm principle gives a rule for limiting liberty while developmental individualism offers a positive ideal justifying broad freedoms; weigh which is the stronger basis for Mill and consider how they operate together in his argument.
- Conclude with an overall judgement about whether Mill's reasons form a coherent defence of liberty, acknowledging strengths such as clear limits on state power and weaknesses such as vagueness over indirect harm and potential limits when individual choices undermine long term capacities.