2.4 The prescribed text: reading a classic text

Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____ **Total: 30 marks**

KEY WORDS prescribed text • harm principle • freedom of expression • paternalism • thesis

Objective

Learn to read and write about a **prescribed text** : identify the author's **thesis**, follow the **argument** step by step, explain key **concepts** in the author's words, and evaluate the text. The worked text is John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859); use the same method for the text your school studies.

You must be able to:

- state the thesis of the text
- reconstruct an argument from the text in steps
- explain the text's key concepts accurately
- apply the text to a modern case
- evaluate the text with objections and replies

1 Key knowledge and worked examples

Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

Thesis: the harm principle . "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." The individual's own good is "not a sufficient warrant".

Freedom of thought and discussion (chapter 2). Silencing an opinion is wrong because:

1. the opinion may be **true**, and we are not infallible;
2. even if false, it may contain **part of the truth**;
3. even if wholly false, challenge keeps true beliefs **alive**, not "dead dogma";
4. without challenge, the meaning of a belief is lost.

Self-regarding and other-regarding actions: society may judge self-regarding actions (e.g. drinking alone) but not punish them; it may limit other-regarding actions that harm others.

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Method for any prescribed text

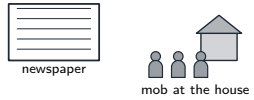
Thesis → key concepts (in the author's words) → steps of the argument → an example from the text → a modern application → an objection → a reply the author could give → your judgement.

Worked application. Should a social media platform remove posts that spread false health claims? Mill: false opinions should be challenged, not silenced, but speech that is a direct incitement to harm (his corn-dealer example: an angry mob outside the dealer's house) may be limited.

2 Practice

2.1 State Mill's **harm principle** in your own words. [2]

2.2 Explain Mill's **corn-dealer** example, and what it shows about the limits of free speech. [3]



2.3 Explain **two** of Mill's reasons for freedom of discussion. [4]

2.4 Evaluate Mill's distinction between **self-regarding** and **other-regarding** actions. [6]

3 Exam-style questions

3.1 *(Prescribed text style.)* Evaluate Mill's claim that silencing an opinion is always wrong. In your answer, refer to the text and to **one** modern case. [15]



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Solutions

Marking: **M1** a correct method, **A1** the correct answer, **B1** an independent mark.

Each answer shows the steps, then the **result**.

2.1

the state or society may limit a person's liberty only to prevent harm to others; not for the person's own good

2.2

the claim "corn-dealers starve the poor" may be printed in a newspaper; but it may be punished when shouted to an angry mob outside a corn-dealer's house; so speech may be limited when it directly incites harm to others; context matters

2.3

any two, explained: the silenced opinion may be true, and to silence it assumes we cannot be wrong; it may contain part of the truth, and the full truth comes from the clash of views; a true opinion that is never challenged becomes "dead dogma", held without understanding the reasons

2.4

explains the distinction with an example; strength: protects individuality and private life; objection: almost every action affects others, e.g. a person who harms their own health affects their family and public health care; Mill's reply: only a definite damage or risk to others counts; objection: paternalism may help people, e.g. seat-belt laws; a reasoned judgement

3.1

Mark with the markbands: [13-15] clearly focused on the question, clear explanation of the philosophical issue, relevant philosophers and arguments used accurately, counter-arguments evaluated, well-developed critical analysis, different perspectives evaluated, a reasoned conclusion; [10-12] focused, mostly accurate knowledge, analysis with some evaluation; [7-9] some focus, relevant knowledge, mostly narrative or description with limited analysis; [4-6] little focus, limited knowledge, mostly narrative; [1-3] little understanding of the question. Points that may be included: accurately explains Mill's claim and its place in On Liberty; reason 1: fallibility; reason 2: partial truth; reasons 3 and 4: dead dogma and loss of meaning; the harm principle and the corn-dealer limit; a modern case, e.g. platform moderation, hate speech laws, health misinformation; objection: some speech harms by its content, e.g. hate speech that silences minorities; objection: in the internet age false claims spread faster than replies; a reply Mill might give; a reasoned conclusion

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