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

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that harm others.

■ **Method for any prescribed text**

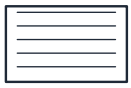
Thesis → key concepts (in the author's words) → steps of the argument → an example from the text → a modern application → an objection → a reply the author could give → your judgement.

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]

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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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