

REVISITING JOHN STUART MILL'S PHILOSOPHY OF FREEDOM: THE BALANCE BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND SOCIAL AUTHORITY

*REVISITANDO A FILOSOFIA DA LIBERDADE DE JOHN
STUART MILL: O EQUILÍBRIO ENTRE A LIBERDADE
INDIVIDUAL E A AUTORIDADE SOCIAL*

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Received: 04 Jul 2025

Accepted: 05 Sep 2025

Published: 28 Sep 2025

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Findings reveal that Mill's defense of freedom of thought, speech, and individuality remains central to modern discussions of civil liberty, yet his model underestimates structural inequalities and collective constraints that shape real freedom. By integrating philosophical, historical, and political perspectives, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of liberty as both a right and a moral condition for human development. It concludes that Mill's liberal ideal—though historically limited—continues to serve as a critical foundation for evaluating the ethical balance between personal autonomy and the collective good in modern democratic societies.

Keywords: John Stuart Mill. Liberty. Individuality. Harm principle. Liberalism. Social authority.

Abstract

This paper reexamines John Stuart Mill's philosophy of freedom as articulated in *On Liberty*, focusing on his enduring attempt to reconcile individual autonomy with the moral and legal boundaries of social order. Through a textual and comparative analysis, the study investigates how Mill's harm principle—that liberty extends only until it causes harm to others—defines the ethical limits of state and social authority. The research situates Mill's liberal thought within nineteenth-century political philosophy while assessing its contemporary relevance to debates on human rights, moral pluralism, and democratic responsibility.

Resumo

Este artigo reexamina a filosofia da liberdade de John Stuart Mill, tal como articulada em *On Liberty*, com foco em sua duradoura tentativa de reconciliar a autonomia individual com os limites morais e legais da ordem social. Por meio de uma análise textual e comparativa, o estudo investiga como o princípio do dano de Mill — segundo o qual a liberdade se estende apenas até o ponto em que causa dano a outros — define os limites éticos da autoridade estatal e social. A pesquisa situa o pensamento liberal de Mill dentro da filosofia política do século XIX, ao mesmo tempo em que avalia sua relevância contemporânea para os debates sobre direitos humanos, pluralismo moral e responsabilidade democrática. Os resultados revelam que a defesa milliana da liberdade de pensamento, expressão e individualidade permanece central nas discussões modernas sobre liberdade civil, ainda que seu modelo subestime as desigualdades estruturais e as restrições coletivas que moldam a liberdade real. Ao integrar perspectivas filosóficas, históricas e políticas, este estudo contribui para uma compreensão mais profunda da liberdade como um direito e uma condição moral para o desenvolvimento humano. Conclui-se que o ideal liberal de Mill — embora historicamente limitado — continua a servir como fundamento crítico para avaliar o equilíbrio ético entre a autonomia pessoal e o bem coletivo nas sociedades democráticas modernas.

Palavras-chave: John Stuart Mill. liberdade. individualidade. princípio do dano. liberalismo. autoridade social.

Introduction

John Stuart Mill lived during a period of profound economic, political, and social transformation. This was an era in which British capitalism had become stable and prosperous, leading to notable achievements in both social and scientific domains. The dynamism of economic and social life at that time brought about major changes in the realm of ideas and culture. New philosophical and political perspectives emerged to reflect these transformations. Against this backdrop, Mill's philosophy inherited and synthesized the intellectual achievements of his time. His political philosophy combined progressive ideas with utilitarianism and positivism (Ngo, 2010, p. 23), and for this reason, his reflections on freedom—and his thought as a whole—contain distinctive features that have exerted a powerful influence on the development of Western philosophy.

This study addresses the central research problem of how John Stuart Mill conceptualized the boundaries between individual liberty and social authority, and to what extent his principle of liberty—grounded in the avoidance of harm—remains relevant for understanding freedom in modern democratic and ethical discourse. In particular, it examines how Mill's liberal philosophy reconciles the tension between personal autonomy and collective responsibility, offering insights that continue to shape contemporary debates on civil rights, moral obligation, and human development.

In the nineteenth century, Mill's *On Liberty* was written in response to the theoretical and practical demands of his age regarding the meaning of freedom. What made his work distinctive was his focus on individual liberty, which he analyzed in close relation to society and the state. Mill defined civil liberty as a necessary limitation on the power of society over the individual. He began his inquiry with a historical review of the idea of freedom, tracing its evolution from antiquity to the significant transformations of his own century. On that foundation, he developed a deep analysis of personal liberty across multiple dimensions, arguing that individual freedom includes the liberty of thought and expression, the freedom to choose one's own tastes and pursuits, and the freedom to associate with others for any purpose that does not cause harm to anyone.

Mill did not stop at defining freedom; he also defended it with exceptional clarity and passion. He believed that because human beings are fallible, they must be free to test and experience different opinions and ways of life. Consequently, only actions that harm or disturb others should be subject to restriction. For Mill, personal liberty must be protected as it is the foundation of individual development

and the engine of social progress. Society, he argued, must have the power to restrain acts that harm others, since it also guarantees the protection of all its members against such harm. His reasoning is especially persuasive in distinguishing between self-regarding actions, which affect only the individual, and other-regarding actions, which cause harm to others. Individuals are not accountable to society for conduct that concerns themselves alone, but they must bear responsibility—and be subject to social sanction—for actions that inflict harm on others.

At the heart of Mill's philosophy of liberty lies a single principle: individuals possess absolute freedom to act as they wish, provided their actions do not harm anyone else. This principle has had a profound and lasting impact on political and social thought in many Western nations, shaping the foundations of modern liberal democracy and the continuing discourse on human freedom.

Research Methodology

Mill's conception of freedom is most clearly articulated in his seminal work *On Liberty*. Accordingly, this study employs textual and comparative analysis as its primary methodological framework. Through close reading and interpretation of *On Liberty*, the research seeks to reconstruct the internal coherence of Mill's arguments concerning the relationship between individual liberty and social authority. The textual method allows for a precise understanding of Mill's philosophical logic, while the comparative dimension situates his views within the broader evolution of Western thought—from classical notions of virtue and civic freedom to modern liberal and utilitarian paradigms. This approach not only clarifies the conceptual foundations of Mill's liberalism but also reveals its enduring relevance to contemporary democratic ethics.

To support this central analysis, the study integrates complementary methods such as analysis, synthesis, and historical-dialectical reasoning, emphasizing the unity of logic and history in philosophical inquiry. A scientific materialist worldview and dialectical methodology were applied to maintain rigor and theoretical depth (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2009, p.31). By adopting an interdisciplinary perspective that bridges philosophy, political science, history, and cultural studies, the research ensures a comprehensive and context-sensitive interpretation of Mill's thought.

The comparative component further enhances the study's analytical value by contrasting Mill's ideas with those of his contemporaries, including other modern liberal thinkers, to highlight both his intellectual inheritance and his innovations. This methodological synthesis enables a critical reassessment of Mill's philosophy as

a turning point in the discourse on freedom—demonstrating that his ideas not only extended the classical liberal tradition but also anticipated modern concerns with individuality, responsibility, and the limits of state authority.

Literature Review

Freedom is a legitimate human aspiration and one of the most fundamental human rights. A full understanding of freedom is the key condition for individuals to attain genuine liberty. When individuals achieve this, they can actively create positive values for themselves, their communities, their nations, and even for the world as a whole. From this perspective, the concept of freedom has appeared very early in the history of philosophy and has been continuously expanded and refined through different epochs. This development reflects the evolution of human thought concerning will, moral responsibility, and the relationship between the individual and society.

Plato viewed true freedom as living in accordance with the ideal of justice, in which the soul follows reason and avoids enslavement to desires (Rakhimdjanova, 2021, p. 4554). Aristotle understood freedom as the condition of a citizen who is not a slave and who has the right to participate in the political life of the polis (Do, 2022, p. 41). Freedom, in this sense, is liberation from tyrannical rule and is closely tied to the natural rights of life, liberty, and property (Do & Nguyen, 2022, p. 2). Rousseau elevated the idea of freedom by distinguishing between natural freedom and civil freedom, asserting that true liberty can only be achieved when individuals obey the *general will* (Do, 2023, p. 307). Jean-Paul Sartre famously declared, “Man is condemned to be free,” meaning that although humans do not create themselves, once they exist, they must choose and take full responsibility for all their actions. This freedom is both a gift and a burden, as it compels us to define our own essence and the meaning of our lives without reliance on any predetermined destiny or purpose (Tran, 2022, p. 64). Karl Marx, meanwhile, argued that true freedom can only be realized through liberation from alienation (Schmidt, 2022, p. 14).

John Stuart Mill created a new turning point in the understanding of freedom. His conception of liberty sparked vigorous intellectual debate. Many scholars have argued that Mill’s views on freedom provided the ideological impetus for democratic transformations in various countries, particularly in the West. Samuel Enoch Stumpf observed that Mill emerged as a powerful advocate for individual freedom in relation to society, and he regarded Mill’s most important contributions as bridging the

diverse liberal traditions in the history of thought (Stumpf, 2004, p. 32). Bryan Magee (2003) described Mill as one of the foremost representatives of utilitarianism and liberalism, as well as a tireless campaigner for women's equality and freedom in modern European society (Bryan Magee, 2003, p. 97). Wendy Donner made an important observation that "the problem of liberty and individual development is one of the most pervasive themes in Mill's political and moral philosophy" (Donner, 1991, p. 112).

1. The Harm Principle

This is the core principle of Mill's philosophy of liberty. Mill upheld the importance of individual freedom but insisted that it must be governed by the rule of "no harm to others." He famously declared: "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." In other words, individuals are completely free in actions that affect only themselves (self-regarding actions), but society has the right to intervene when an action directly harms others (other-regarding actions) (Ngo, 2010, p. 21).

According to Spicer (2014), Mill's Harm Principle serves as a balancing mechanism between personal freedom and social responsibility, preventing abuses of power by either the government or the tyranny of the majority. This reasoning is quite rational because it protects individuals' right to act freely in matters concerning only themselves, even when those actions might be self-destructive. Mill referred to this as the "sphere of consciousness, conscience, thought, feeling, tastes, and pursuits"—the domain where each person may live as they see fit (Ngo, 2011, p. 11). Society, however, has legitimate authority only over actions that affect others—those that cause clear harm to the legitimate interests of another person.

Through this principle, Mill effectively limited the power of society over the individual. The Harm Principle permeates his entire philosophy of freedom, representing a close synthesis between the protection of individuals from social coercion and the utilitarian goal of promoting human development through freedom of thought and personal individuality. For Mill, freedom means the right to live as one wishes, provided that such conduct does not harm others. This ideal allows for human diversity and serves as the foundation of social progress.

2. Freedom of Thought and Expression

Freedom is one of the central themes in Mill's political philosophy. As a passionate advocate of liberalism and utilitarianism, Mill articulated his concept of freedom across many dimensions. He regarded freedom of thought and freedom of speech as essential—indeed, almost absolute—because they serve as the instruments for discovering truth and fostering social progress. For him, freedom of thought and expression are inseparable; one depends on the other.

Freedom of thought, he argued, is a necessary but insufficient condition for human flourishing, because ideas must also be expressed and communicated—hence the need for freedom of speech. Mill saw freedom of expression as an effective defense against the despotism of “public opinion,” which could be manipulated by the state or dominant social groups. Freedom of speech, in his view, is a safeguard against the tyranny of society over the individual, liberating people from the “terror of social conformity” and state coercion.

Mill's defense of free speech was grounded in tolerance toward differing or dissenting opinions and in the conviction that open dialogue is indispensable to truth-seeking and social advancement. He emphasized that intellectual debate must adhere to moral integrity. As he wrote, “It is necessary to condemn anyone, of whatever side or persuasion, who engages in dishonest, malicious, fanatical, or intolerant debate, and to honor anyone who discusses calmly and sincerely” (Mill, 2006, p. 129).

Mill also supported freedom of association, encouraging the right of people from all social classes—ranging from the bourgeois middle class to the working class—to organize freely, such as in cooperative movements and labor unions. He argued that such freedoms can only exist within a civilized community and should apply only to those who have reached full maturity of their faculties—that is, not to children or individuals lacking mental capacity.

Moreover, Mill was a strong supporter of women's rights and the rights of the lower classes (Ngo, 2012, p. 35), a stance that distinguished him from many of his contemporaries and reflected his deeply humanistic outlook.

However, Mill also expressed serious concern about what he called the “tyranny of the majority,” which he saw as a growing threat to individual freedom in both social and political life. He observed that “in our age, from the highest to the lowest ranks of society, everyone lives under the hostile and dreaded eye of censorship” (Ngo, 2010, p. 24). He warned that such conformity would make human life monotonous—people reading, hearing, seeing, visiting the same places, sharing

the same hopes and fears. This, Mill believed, was deeply alarming, because “liberty and the diversity of external circumstances” are the two essential conditions for human development and social progress. When these are lost, individual freedom inevitably suffers.

3. Freedom of Action and the Expression of Individuality

For John Stuart Mill, personal freedom does not end with spiritual or intellectual liberty (Nguyen & Do, 2024, p. 583; Nguyen & Do, 2025, p. 9); it also encompasses the freedom to act and to express one’s creative individuality—the liberty to cultivate one’s “individuality,” or personal identity as manifested through one’s way of life. Thus, in Mill’s philosophy, freedom is inseparable from the social environment in which individuals live. People, he argued, should be free to experiment with different ways of living in order to achieve the greatest happiness, in accordance with the goal of utilitarianism. Allowing individuals to develop their own character, to choose and pursue their distinctive preferences, leads to diversity and innovation, which in turn generate better models of life for society as a whole. Mill believed that the rational choice and experimentation with different lifestyles constitute the only path through which human beings can grow into mature, strong, and well-rounded individuals. Accordingly, society should encourage individuality and personal experimentation in life plans.

Mill examined the issue of the individual with great care. He asked whether citizens should be allowed to act according to their own judgment without facing punishment from the law or social stigma. He concluded that personal actions cannot be completely unrestricted, for they may harm others. As he stated, “Any conduct injurious to the interests of others, without justifiable cause, may be, and in more serious cases absolutely must be, controlled by the disapprobation of society, and, if necessary, by the active interference of mankind to prevent it. Thus the liberty of the individual must be thus far limited; he must not make himself a nuisance to other people” (Mill, 2006, p. 132).

Nevertheless, Mill also insisted that diverse opinions must be respected because, as he wrote, “As mankind are imperfect, it is useful that different opinions should be held; there should be different experiments of living; the free scope of individuality should be respected, so long as it does not harm others” (Mill, 2006, p. 133). Diversity in personality and conduct, he argued, is essential for the progress of both individuals and society.

Mill criticized the excessive exercise of freedom when it turns into recklessness

or self-indulgence. Yet he also warned that excessive control over such freedom would stifle desire and eliminate the very impulses that drive individual diversity—an equally dangerous condition for social development (Ngo, 2011, p. 13). From this perspective, Mill affirmed that individuality, even eccentricity, carries intrinsic value because society can learn from those who deviate from established customs and conventions. In other words, dissent and nonconformity are necessary conditions for discovering new values.

Mill advanced a remarkably modern argument for personal liberty by asserting that when an individual has reached full maturity, they have the right to choose the best life for themselves, since only they truly know what is good for them (Ngo, 2011, p. 13). Consequently, society must provide different spaces for individuals to develop and realize their highest potential. This plurality contributes to a healthy and dynamic society that accommodates many models of living rather than enforcing a single one.

Along with his defense of individual liberty, Mill strongly condemned coercion and despotism, which he believed prevent people from learning from one another. He wrote, “The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress, or improvement” (Mill, 2006, p. 162).

Mill maintained that the freedom to express one’s individuality and creativity is not only essential for personal development but also indispensable for social advancement. He observed, “Europe owes its progress and its variety of development to this plurality of paths. It is, however, beginning to possess this advantage in a considerably less degree. It is becoming more and more like China, making all people alike” (Mill, 2006, pp. 166–167). Thus, he reasoned that Europe’s relative diversity of lifestyles and modes of thinking had enabled its progress beyond the stagnation of despotism, as exemplified by China. Yet he also expressed concern that Europe might face stagnation and decline if it continued to move toward greater uniformity.

When discussing personal freedom, Mill acknowledged that individuality is constrained by both law and social pressure. Under the influence of public opinion and the expansive reach of legal authority, individuals often feel compelled to conform, thereby restricting their ability to make meaningful choices and pursue self-development. Genuine personal growth, he argued, requires active interaction with others of diverse personalities; through such exchanges, individuals refine and perfect themselves. It is precisely through disagreement and debate that new truths and values emerge. Therefore, the loss of individuality leads inevitably to stagnation

and a lifeless society.

4. The Relationship Between Social Authority and Individual Freedom

John Stuart Mill regarded freedom as the limitation of social power. He recognized that danger to liberty arises not only from the despotic power of the state, but also from the “tyranny of the majority” in democratic societies. Such tyranny may manifest through public opinion, social pressure, and collective coercion, which can suppress individuality and personal diversity even more harshly than a government can. Hence, Mill addressed the relationship between social authority and personal liberty in order to determine the legitimate boundaries within which society may interfere with individual freedom.

Mill clearly asserted that “each will receive its proper share if each has that which more particularly concerns it. The part which chiefly interests the individual’s life must belong to the individual; the part which chiefly interests society must belong to society” (Mill, 2006, p. 171). This means that both the individual and society should each exercise authority over the sphere of human life that most directly concerns them. Importantly, Mill emphasized that the relationship between personal freedom and social authority is dynamic, diverse, and constantly adjusted in order to maintain a delicate balance.

In addressing this relationship, Mill rejected the traditional notion of a social contract. He argued that since individuals enjoy the protection of society, they must also comply with certain principles: they must not harm the interests of others, must share in social burdens, must protect society and its members from harm, and must accept social criticism when their conduct causes injury to others (Do, 2023, p. 308). Accordingly, society has legitimate authority over any aspect of human behavior where “the conduct of an individual affects prejudicially the interests of others; society has jurisdiction over it” (Mill, 2006, p. 172).

To defend individual liberty, Mill presented subjective but compelling arguments, maintaining that society should not concern itself with a person’s life if his actions affect only himself, or even if they affect others with their consent. Such actions, he argued, should be accepted both legally and socially.

Along with his rejection of the social contract theory, Mill proposed two fundamental principles:

First, “The individual is not accountable to society for his actions, in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself” (Mill, 2006, p. 212). This

means that society may respond only through “advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance” (Mill, 2006, p. 212)—the only morally justified means for expressing disapproval of someone’s conduct.

Second, “For such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable, and may be subjected either to social or legal punishment, if society is of opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection” (Mill, 2006, p. 212). Such punishment, Mill believed, is necessary and legitimate.

When discussing punishment, Mill argued that people have no right to denounce what they merely *believe* to be wrong in others’ behavior, though they may avoid or warn others about it. He explained, “These punishments are natural—spontaneous consequences of the faults themselves, not inflicted with the express intention of punishing” (Mill, 2006, p. 177). However, he also emphasized that punishment should stop there; no one has the right to morally denounce, humiliate, or ostracize another person.

For Mill, individual freedom also means that one should not be treated with anger or hatred, nor regarded as an enemy, merely for engaging in actions that others disapprove of but that harm no one else. Anyone who seeks to impose their moral standards on others must, he argued, be prepared to accept the same imposition in return.

Mill further condemned coercive and unjust laws or social practices that violate freedom and fairness—such as alcohol prohibitions, Sabbath restrictions on recreation, or the persecution of Mormon believers for their practice of polygamy. He contended that while people are free to preach against such behaviors—drinking, amusement, or polygamy—and to try to persuade others through moral reasoning, they must never resort to coercive measures that force others to conform to their will.

Thus, in the relationship between social authority and individual liberty, Mill consistently defended a single guiding principle: actions should be punished only when they cause harm to others. Despite his profound effort to refine the theory of personal freedom, Mill’s reasoning remains partly unconvincing, for even he acknowledged that no individual can exist completely isolated from society, and that every person’s actions inevitably exert some influence on others.

Discussion

John Stuart Mill’s philosophy of freedom represents a significant contribution to the modern understanding of liberty as both a moral and political concept.

His reflections extend beyond the defense of individual rights; they form a comprehensive ethical framework for reconciling personal autonomy with the moral responsibilities that sustain collective life. By situating liberty at the intersection of self-development and social order, Mill provided one of the most enduring models for liberal thought in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Mill's work is particularly valuable for its insistence that freedom is not merely the absence of restraint but the condition for human flourishing. His "harm principle" establishes a rational boundary between the individual and society, asserting that state or social interference is justified only to prevent harm to others. This distinction remains a cornerstone of democratic ethics because it upholds the integrity of personal autonomy while preserving social stability (Spicer, 2014, p. 5; Bell, 2021, p. 93). In this sense, Mill's liberalism achieves a delicate equilibrium—freedom is maximized, yet disciplined by moral responsibility.

The study's textual-comparative analysis reveals that Mill's vision of liberty is not static or absolute but dialectical: it evolves through tension between independence and obligation, individuality and community. By engaging Mill's arguments in dialogue with thinkers such as Rousseau, Marx, and Sartre, we observe that his thought occupies a mediating position between classical civic virtue and modern existential autonomy. Whereas Rousseau grounded freedom in collective will, and Marx in material emancipation, Mill anchored it in the moral autonomy of the individual acting within a just social framework (Ngo, 2011, p. 15; Do & Nguyen, 2022, p. 3). This synthesis underscores his belief that the progress of civilization depends upon protecting diversity of thought and experimentation in living.

A crucial insight emerging from this study is that Mill's defense of liberty entails both ethical pluralism and epistemic humility. Because human beings are fallible, open discussion and free inquiry become moral imperatives, not just political rights. Even erroneous opinions contribute to the refinement of truth by exposing the limits of dominant beliefs (Blasi, 2024, p. 16). Mill thus transforms freedom of thought into a collective epistemological process essential to both personal and societal progress.

At the same time, the comparative analysis exposes several unresolved tensions in Mill's framework. His liberal optimism presupposes a rational and moral public capable of self-restraint, a condition rarely realized in modern societies marked by inequality and media manipulation. Moreover, as critics such as Wilkinson (2020) and Hansson (2020) note, the harm principle does not easily address the indirect or structural forms of harm prevalent in today's digital and globalized world. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish Mill's importance; rather, they high-

light the enduring challenge of adapting classical liberal principles to new contexts of social interdependence.

Ultimately, the discussion demonstrates that Mill's philosophy continues to provide a normative foundation for debates on civil liberty, human rights, and democratic participation. His thought invites a reconsideration of freedom not as an isolated possession of the individual but as a dynamic moral relationship—a continuous negotiation between personal conscience and collective well-being. In this respect, Mill's legacy transcends its Victorian origins, offering valuable guidance for contemporary societies striving to balance autonomy with ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

John Stuart Mill's conception of liberty stands as a defining moment in the intellectual history of modern philosophy. His thought, rooted in utilitarian ethics yet reaching beyond it, establishes a coherent moral and political framework that continues to influence liberal and democratic theory. Through a close textual and comparative analysis of *On Liberty*, this study has shown that Mill's philosophy seeks to reconcile the tension between individual autonomy and social authority, offering a nuanced understanding of freedom as both a personal right and a moral responsibility.

Mill's "harm principle" provides a rational boundary between liberty and coercion, ensuring that freedom is exercised without endangering the welfare of others. This principle, though formulated in the nineteenth century, retains profound relevance for addressing contemporary debates on censorship, moral responsibility, and collective ethics. By highlighting the ethical dimension of liberty, Mill transformed freedom from a mere political privilege into a moral precondition for human progress.

At the same time, this study recognizes that Mill's framework, while visionary, bears certain historical and theoretical limitations. His emphasis on rational individuality overlooks structural inequalities and collective forms of harm that characterize modern societies. Yet, these shortcomings invite rather than diminish philosophical reflection, urging renewed engagement with the evolving boundaries of human freedom.

Ultimately, Mill's legacy endures as a living dialogue between the right to self-determination and the duty of social care. His vision continues to challenge both individuals and institutions to preserve diversity, cultivate moral responsibility, and pursue the higher ideal of freedom grounded in humanity's shared ethical progress.

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