The purpose of this paper is to explain how Utilitarianism supports Mill’s Liberty Principle. The Liberty Principle, or harm principle, simply states that the only justified reason someone can stop another person from doing what they want, against their will, is if it will cause harm to others. On the other hand, Utilitarianism, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, is basically stating that the goal of an action or event is to make the most people the happiest. In reference to the greatest happiness principle, the opposite of happiness is not necessarily sadness but is simply referred to as the “opposite of happy;” and this is important to keep in mind when listening to the argument that I will present later on in the paper. I find that the following considerations: the definitions of both the harm principle and utilitarianism, and specific quotes from Mill’s book “On Liberty;” provide a convincing argument as to why utilitarian’s should in fact support Mill’s liberty principle.

First, in this paragraph I will be defining in detail and explaining elements of Mill’s liberty principle or harm principle and what harm, to Mill, actually is. Mill defined it best when he wrote these two passages, “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” (Mill 9). The other passage is, “The only freedom which deserves the name is that pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. Each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily, or mental or spiritual. Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by
compelling each to live as seems good to the rest” (Mill 12). This is a substantial excerpt from Mill’s “On Liberty,” and I will break it down in order to better understand the harm principle. First, Mill is saying that the only thing that deserves to be called liberty is doing what we want as long as it is not hurting others, or obstructing their way to obtain their own happiness. Then it explains that each person watches out for themselves, and humans live better when they live for their own happiness rather than conforming to others. This is a big part in how the liberty principle is supported by utilitarianism. This is so because if all utilitarians are following the liberty principle then they should all be compiling pleasure through their own actions and not harming anyone else in the process. If this is the case, then it is following the GHP because there is a lot of pleasure for a lot of people and there is no pain. These connections will be made clearer in the third paragraph. Ultimately, parents do have the right to decide what is best for children because they are not yet at that mature level to know what is good for them and what is not; and also uncivilized civilizations need guidance and cannot make these decisions by themselves.

Unfortunately, harm and how it is inflicted on others it a complex topic that I will touch on next. There are essentially two types of harm: direct and indirect. Direct harm is the physical action of causing pain or the opposite of happiness on another person. An example of this would be stabbing someone with a knife. This action would cause direct harm or immediate harm to the other person. Based on this activity, people do have the right to intervene on your liberty because it will inflict harm on someone else, no matter how happy it will make you to do it. On the other hand, indirect harm is a little more complex. Mill does not come out and say exactly what would count as indirect harm, but one good example is how your life would be affected if someone you were close to and loved was slowly destroying their life with drugs. Maybe because you care so
much for that person that it emotionally eats you on the inside. This would not physically harm you but eventually it would get to you and cause you emotional and mental grievance. One may ask if harm includes offense or just physical harm. According to Mill, offense cannot be measured as harm because people can be easily offended or don’t become offended very easily, therefore; there are different levels of offense. Harm is basically physically injuring someone or holding them back from their own happiness. This more or less sums up the major ideas of the Liberty Principle, and in the next paragraph I will explain the Greatest Happiness Principle in much further detail.

Second, Mill explains his greatest happiness principle very simply in his book “On Liberty.” This principle is the one I am going to be examining now in order to get a better grasp on how utilitarianism and the liberty principle correlate with each other. Mill is quoted as saying, “The Greatest Happiness Principle holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure, and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure” (2008). Although this passage is pretty straightforward I will explain it in simpler terms in order to better understand it. Basically, what Mill is proposing is that according to a Utilitarian, actions are unjustifiably right if they produce happiness, or pleasure, and have an absence of pain. This is a key point into looking at the connection of utilitarianism and the liberty principle. According to the liberty principle a person has the right to do what makes them happy, unless of course it will harm others in the process of doing so. What “harm” entails is a much deeper thought that I explained in the previous paragraph dedicated to the liberty principle. Another thought on the GHP (Greatest Happiness Principle) is the way pleasure is measured. According to Mill, pleasure (happiness) is measured on both a qualitative and quantitative scale. We will first talk about
quantity and how this affects pleasure. In regards to the two measurements of pleasure, quantity is the simpler of the two meaning that the goal is to just garner the greatest amount of pleasure. The qualitative side is a little more complex offering that two actions or events when compared are not going to have the same amount of pleasure, and that there are higher and lower pleasures. As humans, we tend to always look for the higher pleasures. A quick definition of a higher pleasure is that a pleasure is higher quality if someone would choose it over a different pleasure, and would not trade it for more of the other pleasure. This sums up most of the important information about the Greatest Happiness Principle. So to reflect, the GHP/Utilitarianism wants the greatest pleasure for the greatest number of people, and in the following paragraph I will justify my position as to why I support Mill’s claim that utilitarianism supports the harm principle.

Third, Mill supports his claims that utilitarianism supports the liberty principle, and I am going to take the stance that also supports this claim. In the most obvious way, the GHP and harm principle correlate with each other because of pleasure. According to the GHP, the goal of utilitarianism is to have the most amount of pleasure for the most people. As I stated in a previous paragraph, if all utilitarians are following the harm principle, then they are going to have the greatest amount of pleasure. They will get the pleasure out of focusing on their own liberties and not harming any others in the process. When people focus their attention to pursuing their own liberties then they are doing something they genuinely love and and care about; which in turn would increase their happiness. If say the government was guiding people on how to maximize their happiness, then are the people really pursuing what would make them the happiest? Is this actually accumulating the maximum amount of happiness? No. This is because society is not free to do what they want but instead are following orders from others. If all
utilitarians did this, then the the amount of happiness would show how well the harm principle does for utilitarianism. Now there are objections to this of course, and right now I will explain an objection then further support my argument. A person not fond of the liberty principle may say that in order to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure, one must harm others, if that is what will bring them pleasure. This does not violate the harm principle, but what it does is state a reason for utilitarians not to follow the harm principle. I refute this objection because in order to achieve the maximum amount of pleasure in utilitarianism, one must justify an action based on how much pleasure the most amount of people are getting out of it.

Another main argument that I will use to support my stance is that people tend to be good at pursuing their own happiness or pleasure. Since they want to get the most happiness they can, utilitarianism will most likely prefer to leave people to themselves; which in turn allows them to get the most pleasure from their life. The last objection I will recognize is a reference to heroin users that we discussed in class. According to our discussion leader, there are certain actions that one might take that violate the liberty principle. The action discussed was the prohibition of heroin, and its effects on pleasure. A person who is using heroin would technically not be harming anyone but himself, and if that is what made him happy then he should be allowed to do it. But since we see the potential health effects heroin has on people then banning it would also technically create the most pleasure from society as well (Mills, 2016). In any case, the GHP still supports the liberty principle because of the following reason. As I have stated before, utilitarianism is all about the most pleasure for the most people and in this case, the most amount of people are still having the maximum pleasure. There is an obvious tension between the GHP and the liberty principle, and it could go either way. Because of the potential effects people being on heroin has on the society around them this is a tough question. In this case if the harm
principle calls for the use of heroin being okay, then my rebuttal is that although this wouldn’t be direct harm to society it could cause indirect harm to society and friends and family of these addicts by watching their life be withered away. The liberty principle does state that one may prohibit someone from doing a particular action if it impedes others right to happiness. In this case it does because the majority will argue that heroin and those addicted to it impede their happiness and contribute to the harm of others almost exclusively indirectly. This wraps up my support for Mill’s claim.

To conclude, the goal of this paper was to support Mill’s claims that utilitarianism supports the liberty principle. I recognize that the liberty principle reinforces the GHP because allowing people to think and do for themselves in most cases is the basis for a large amount of pleasure fulfilment. I supported this by drawing in the definitions of both the liberty principle and utilitarianism, as well as a quote from Mill found on a webpage, excerpts from our discussion, and passages from “On Liberty.” These are the reasons that his claim is valid.
