«War is an ugly thing, but not the ugliest of things: the decayed and degraded state of moral and patriotic feeling which thinks that nothing is *worth* a war, is much worse […] A man who has nothing which he is willing to fight for, nothing which he cares more about than he does about his personal safety, is a miserable creature who has no chance of being free, unless made and kept so by the exertions of better men than himself.”

- John Stuart Mill: The Contest in America, p 31 (1862)

This quote from John Stuart Mill compares the immorality of war with the immorality of refraining from war due to a lack of commitment to any goal or virtue. Mill claims that the belief that there is never a sufficient reason to go to war is much worse than war itself. Moreover, he states that persons who are incapable of finding goals or commitments to fight for have “no chance of being free.” This seems to suggest a fundamental relationship between freedom and struggle; freedom is achieved by the work of people who are committed to obtaining freedom and struggle against tyranny. Finally, Mill writes that only the exertions of others can keep a person unwilling to struggle free. From the belief that freedom is preserved by the struggle exerted against concentrated power in societies, one understands that the people who refuse to struggle for freedom have no chance of being free unless others struggle in their stead.

When discussing a quote by John Stuart Mill, one should keep in mind some of his ideological perspective to properly interpret the quotation. Mill was a classical liberal; opposition to excessive domination and control over people by authoritative institutions was important to him. In his day, concentrated power was firmly rested in the hands of the church and the state, which is why he was in favour of separating the two of them, and the reason why he was a champion of personal rights. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, he was opposed to all kinds of excessive domination and authority exerted over innocents by the state or the church.

If one views Mill’s writing through this lens, we better understand his arguments. For instance, we see that his definition of freedom, at least the one most relevant to this quote, is the absence of coercion from tyrannical institutions. People are free when they are able to act without interference from authoritative institutions such as the state or the church. In this context, relating struggle and hardship to achieving freedom is appropriate. The most striking examples of achieving freedom involved great struggle from large numbers of people. For example, the struggle necessary to abolish slavery was great.

If we use Mill’s reasoning in the example of slavery, the slaves who did not fight for their freedom were the people with “no chance of being free.” As Mill certainly was aware of, slavery existed for hundreds of years without being abolished. Slavery was abolished by people sacrificing their own personal safety for the betterment of society. At the quote’s year of publication, 1862, this was highly relevant, since the two sides of the American Civil War were in conflict with one another due to exactly the issue of slavery. Without the struggle and hardships of millions of slaves and free persons who were willing to fight for freedom, slavery could not have been overcome. The same is true of the democratic revolutions in the United States and in Western Europe. They would have been impossible without the hard and long struggle from people who believed that introducing democracy would be a great improvement to society. This certainly supports Mill’s claim of a relationship between freedom and struggle.

Without opposition, dominating institutions in any society attempt to extend their power through all means available to them. They will exploit innocents, take control of resources, and otherwise do anything that will maintain their power in society. Mill correctly asserted that people who are unwilling to fight for freedom allow such institutions to impede personal liberties. Mill argues that “better men” are the individuals who fight for the freedoms of everyone in a society, despite knowing it might be dangerous for them. They are selflessly struggling for the chance to be free, while the “miserable creatures,” concerned only with their “personal safety,” are selfish and, unlike the “better men” do not act for the betterment of all of society. Mill clearly values work that is done to further a goal one is committed to, such as the work attempting to abolish slavery. He also shows a deep resentment of indifference and unwillingness to attempt making changes to better society.

Domination in a society is maintained through an apathetic population. In this case, apathetic people are those who believe that efforts to change society are useless, and therefore decide to refrain from any political involvement. The structure of societies dominated by tyranny such as monarchies, dictatorships, or oligarchies, are maintained by the obedience of the citizenry. After all, all hierarchies depend upon the obedience of people at the lower levels of the hierarchy. If a sufficient number of people in any hierarchical institution revolt and demand changes to it, it must change or it is forced to dissolve. The larger and the more powerful such hierarchies are, the more difficult they become to influence, which is why dictatorships and generally tyrannical regimes have existed for so long despite their existence being against the interests of their citizens. While tyrannies prefer their population to be loyal and obedient, an apathetic and indifferent one is almost just as good. After all, believing that an authority is illegitimate will not result in any societal change unless people act on those beliefs. It is only when people organize, rebel, and revolt against tyranny that domination can be overcome. The people who do not have values or goals they are committed to are no better than the people who support tyrannies. The “miserable creature” Mill refers to is a person who recognises tyranny but refuses to fight against it, thereby allowing it to continue.

Mill compares the immorality of war with the immorality of people who do not fight for any values. He concludes that it is the latter who are more immoral. Can this really be true? After all, war has caused an unimaginable amount of suffering and destruction within human societies. One reason why Mill believes persons unwilling to struggle are worse might be that detachment and indifference to tyranny can maintain it. The reason why the English could mistreat people in India during their period of colonisation, the reason the United States could invade Vietnam and almost destroy Vietnam as a social and cultural entity, and the reason the Nazi regime in Germany during the second World War could murder millions of innocents is that while these regimes were committing these horrible acts of violence, the privileged citizens of these nations did very little, if anything, to stop them. In fact, many intellectuals and persons with respectful positions in society even supported the atrocities. When it comes to this, I vehemently agree with Mill. The persons who can most efficaciously impede the attempts of violent regimes to exploit, coerce, and control people are privileged citizens who are materially secure and who have relative freedoms in their societies. Intellectuals, professors, and economic leaders are good examples. If these kinds of citizens are ruled by tyrannical regimes, it is their responsibility to oppose that tyranny as much as they possibly can, because their inaction could lead to highly immoral exertions of tyrannical institutions.

Many, if not all, states and authoritative institutions use violent and oppressive means to extend their power and influence if it is in their interest to do so. In order to prevent acts of coercion or incursions on personal liberty, people must collectively organize and oppose the institutions who commit such acts. The ones who do this despite endangering themselves act morally and selflessly for the common good of all citizens. If one recognizes the suffering that is caused by tyranny, one has a responsibility to inform about and organize people to impede any acts that cause this suffering. Only societies where this moral thinking is recognised and accepted can change for the better.