

Ethical Theory

Defending Individuality

As you read the material for the next class, keep the questions below in mind. To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages. Keep in mind that there are two basic kinds of information that you need to look for in the readings:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible conclusion about an issue, rather than another.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently to these issues in the next class meeting.

Readings

- *On Liberty*, chapter 3 (pp. 131–146 in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*).

The book does not number the paragraphs in *On Liberty*, so you will need to number them yourself in the page margins. Chapter 3 is 19 paragraphs total in length.

Questions

1. Mill presents (especially in paragraphs 1, 11 & 14 of chapter 3) an “epistemic” argument in favor of permitting a wide scope for individuality. An epistemic argument is one that appeals to our cognitive limitations and the methods available to us to learn the truth of some subject matter. What is this argument? (Hint: You might notice that this argument has some similarities to the “epistemic” argument Mill gave in paragraphs 3–20 of chapter 2 for defending freedom of expression.)
2. Mill also argues (especially in paragraphs 2–10 of chapter 3) arguing that individuality is an important component of individual happiness. Keeping in mind Mill’s understanding of happiness, what exactly is this argument in support of individuality?
3. Mill describes (especially in paragraphs 1, 9, 13 & 17 of chapter 3) the conditions under which the liberties of individuality may be rightly circumscribed and illustrates how these limits are grounded in the harm principle. What is this argument?
4. The majority will often find the expression of individuality to be a nuisance, and so they might claim that it detracts from social utility and ought to be curbed, limited, or suppressed. In response, Mill argues (especially in paragraphs 10–19) that there are some extremely valuable social benefits associated with permitting a wide scope for individual differences as well as distinctive social costs to curbing it. What is Mill’s argument here?