

Ethical Theory

The Nature & Purpose of Liberty

As you read the material for our 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 reading:

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 about these issues at our next class meeting.

Reading

- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, chapter 1 (pp. 88–98 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 1 has 16 paragraphs.

Questions

1. What issue does Mill say he seeks to address in *On Liberty*?
2. Mill compares the need for liberty in societies governed by monarchies (in chapter 1, paragraph 2) with the need for liberty in democratic societies (in chapter 1, paragraphs 3–8). In each case, why is liberty needed and what is liberty supposed to protect an individual against?
3. Mill says “the object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle” (chapter 1, paragraph 9). This principle is typically called the harm principle. What is the principle? What does the harm principle protect against? To whom does this principle apply? According to Mill (in chapter 1, paragraphs 9–11), how is he going to justify this principle? Does the harm principle only apply to active harms, or does it also apply to passive ones as well (see chapter 1, paragraph 11)?
4. Finally, to what three categories of liberties/rights does Mill claim (in chapter 1, paragraphs 12–16) the harm principle protects? What do you think these three categories have in common in order for Mill to suggest that they are the appropriate ones for liberty to protect?