

ETHICAL THEORY

Defending Individuality

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*, "Of Individuality, as one of the Elements of Well-being".

The text does not number the paragraphs in *On Liberty*, so you will need to number them yourself. This section has 19 paragraphs.

Questions

1. Mill presents (in "Of Individuality, as one of the Elements of Well-being", paragraphs 1, 11, and 14) 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 is similar to Mill's "epistemic" argument from *On Liberty*, "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion", paragraphs 3–20 defending freedom of expression.)

2. Mill also argues (in "Of Individuality, as one of the Elements of Well-being", paragraphs 2–10) that individuality is an important component of a person's happiness. Keeping in mind Mill's understanding of well-being and happiness (from *Utilitarianism*, "What Utilitarianism Is"), what exactly is his argument in support of individuality?
3. Mill describes (in "Of Individuality, as one of the Elements of Well-being", paragraphs 1, 9, 13 and 17) the conditions under which the liberties of individuality may be rightly circumscribed and he 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 such expression detracts from social utility and ought to be curbed, limited, or suppressed.

In response, Mill argues (in "Of Individuality, as one of the Elements of Well-being", paragraphs 10–19) that there still are extremely valuable social benefits associated with permitting a wide scope of individual differences as well as distinctive social costs to curbing and suppressing it. What is Mill's argument here?