

SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

READING GUIDE #24

INDIVIDUALITY & FREEDOM

WHEN doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

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 position on an issue, rather than another.

READING

Mill, J. S. (2003). Of individuality, as one of the elements of well-being [Chapter 3 from *On liberty*]. In M. Warnock (Ed.), *Utilitarianism and On liberty: Including Mill's 'Essay on Bentham' and selections from the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin* (2nd ed., pp. 31–146). Blackwell. (Original work from 1859)

To make it easier for us to discuss this reading, I strongly suggest numbering its paragraphs. There are 19 paragraphs here.

QUESTIONS

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. John Stuart Mill presents (in 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 the last reading, when he defended freedom of expression.)
2. Mill also argues (in paragraphs 2–10) that individuality is an important component of a person’s happiness.
What exactly is this argument, and how does it support individuality?
3. Mill describes (in paragraphs 1, 9, 13 and 17) the conditions under which the liberties of individuality may be rightly

restricted while showing how these limits are grounded in the harm principle.

What exactly is this argument, and how does it support individuality?

4. The majority will often find the expression of individuality a nuisance, and so they might claim that such expression detracts from social utility and ought to be curbed, limited, censored, or otherwise suppressed.

In response, Mill argues (in paragraphs 10–19) that there still are extremely valuable social benefits associated with permitting a wide scope of individual differences as well as substantial social costs to curbing and suppressing it.

What exactly is this argument, and how does it support individuality?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

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.