

COLLOQUIUM: THE ETHICS OF INDIVIDUALISM

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The eighteenth-century Enlightenment upheld the primacy of principles of free inquiry and equality. Nevertheless, the French Revolution showed how a regime that declared itself founded on liberty could suppress individual rights. On the reactionary right, some prominent conservatives such as Joseph de Maistre concluded that Enlightenment values were misconceived and self-defeating, while some voices on the utopian left questioned the necessity of liberty to the pursuit of happiness.

This debate led to a reshaping, in the nineteenth century, of our idea of liberty. Formerly, liberty had been considered, above all, as a matter of political rights in a democratic and egalitarian society. However, nineteenth-century liberals such as Benjamin Constant and John Stuart Mill reached the conclusion that liberty also meant that people should be permitted to live and flourish in the manner each individual sees fit.

This debate continues to our day. We are not finished with the nineteenth century—or with the eighteenth century either. Do the ethics of individualism to which Constant and Mill subscribed define how we moderns understand liberty? What kinds of limits should we wish to place on rights of unfettered self-expression? We will examine these questions through Constant's *Liberty of the Ancients and Moderns* and Mill's *On Liberty*.

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