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Liberalism and Epistemic Diversity: Mill's Sceptical Legacy

ABSTRACT

Although John Stuart Mill places considerable emphasis on three information signalling devices – debate, votes and prices – he remains curiously sceptical about the prospects of institutional or social epistemology. In this paper, I explore Mill's modest scepticism about institutional epistemology and compare and contrast that with the attitudes of liberal theorists such as F. A. Hayek and John Dewey who are much more enthusiastic about the prospects of social epistemology as part of their defences of liberalism. The paper examines the extent to which Hayek and Dewey ignore concerns originally raised by Mill. I conclude that Mill's modest scepticism is reflected in the epistemological abstinence of contemporary liberal philosophers such as John Rawls, and that his elevation of philosophy over democracy remains a challenge to contemporary defenders of the political value of social or institutional epistemology.

In whatever way contemporary liberalism seeks to abandon methods and arguments posed by earlier thinkers it remains implicated in problems that were raised in Mill's complex and pregnant writings of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet ever since the nineteenth century there have been liberal thinkers who cast doubts upon Mill's canonical position. Many classical liberals accuse him of apostasy for his separation of social and political liberalism from economic liberalism.[1] The distinction that Mill draws in his writings on political economy between issues of production and exchange, and questions of distribution with the implication that the latter can be a matter of public political deliberation gave rise to a rupture in the tradition that later thinkers such as Hayek and those influenced by him came to regard as a step on the road to Socialism. Other later liberals regard Mill's utilitarian philosophical foundations as ultimately corrosive of the liberal principles of freedom and equality that he claims to aspire to.[2] Mill's preoccupation with distinctions between quantity and quality of pleasures and attempts to derive a robust defence of liberty from considerations of welfare maximisation seem curiously anachronistic in the face of a contractualist liberalism that Mill would have found deeply puzzling. Yet although it appears that the subsequent development of liberalism into the twentieth century involves a progressive abandonment of Mill's ideas and approach, we can nevertheless argue that the subsequent development of liberalism, passing through Hayek and Dewey to the likes of John Rawls in the late twentieth century reflects concerns that are central to Mill. That in itself is not a particularly novel claim. Yet in this paper I will

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offer a different version of this claim by focusing on a concern of Mill's that is largely overlooked in contemporary discussions. This concern is embodied in Mill's modest scepticism about the claims of social epistemology and his appreciation of the political problem of maintaining epistemic diversity in the face of positional advantage and vested interests. I intend to claim that whilst contemporary political liberalism differs markedly from Mill's comprehensive doctrine, it retains his modest scepticism about social epistemology and his awareness of the problem of maintaining epistemic diversity, and this is an important lesson as less sceptical liberal theorists such as Hayek or Dewey enjoy a resurgence of interest amongst contemporary democratic theorists.

MILL ON EPISTEMIC DIVERSITY

The problem of social epistemology and the related condition of epistemic diversity play an important role in Mill's naturalistic social and political theory and in his philosophy of science and of man. As what would now be called a 'comprehensive' liberal, Mill's defence of liberal political principles forms part of a wider philosophical vision, which includes claims about how each knowing subject comes to have the beliefs they have, and what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for those beliefs being true. Mill's fundamental epistemological position falls squarely into the empiricist tradition and rejects the rationalism and intuitionism of contemporaries such as Sir William Hamilton.[3] His philosophy of science is fundamentally inductivist although Mill gives a significant role to deduction from empirical generalisations in his conception of the nature and practice natural and social science. Yet there is also recognition in Mill's work, that institutions might also play a role in pooling diverse information and might thus assist in the growth of knowledge and the dissemination of true beliefs. Mill's utilitarian approach to philosophy suggests that the growth of knowledge is itself a condition of human happiness and flourishing. In so far as institutions might have a role in bringing together diverse sources of information they must play an important role in his philosophy. The social or institutional dimension of epistemology is fundamental to Mill's pursuit of truth, happiness and progress. Yet it is clear that Mill is far less sanguine about the prospects and benefits of social epistemology than many later thinkers.

By way of examining Mill's complex attitude to social epistemology and its implications for the subsequent development of liberalism we can identify three important mechanisms by which these diverse sources of information can be transmitted and which feature importantly in Mill's writings; these are through speech and discussion, through the price mechanism of free markets and through votes in elections and legislatures. Anyone with a passing familiarity with Mill's writings will appreciate the importance of each epistemic transmission mechanism in aspects of his major writings. In the rest of this section I will outline Mill's attitude to each transition mechanism and argue that the epistemological and political importance of each differs in crucial respects.

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Speech and discussion

Mill's most forthright and unequivocal defence of epistemic diversity is to be found in Chapter 2 of the essay *On Liberty*.[4] In this chapter Mill offers a defence of the maximum degree of free speech and publication, qualified only by a stringent interpretation of the demands of public order. Inciting angry mobs or shouting 'fire' in a crowded theatre are both ruled as legitimate exceptions to the general liberty of speech and discussion, but pretty much anything else goes. Although Chapter 2 *On Liberty* is devoted to speech and opinion, Mill's argument extends beyond this in the subsequent chapter where his ideal of individuality provides a defence of free expression of ideals, beliefs and values, in ways that may not be covered by the more intellectualist defence of free speech and discussion. Although the argument for an ideal of individuality in Chapter 3 of *On Liberty* draws on ideas of personal autonomy translated into the language of utilitarianism, it is clear that Mill remains committed to individuality as a condition of social experimentation designed to progress towards moral truth.[5] Mill is not concerned with expression for its own sake. Expression in terms of experiments in living is concerned with the sincere pursuit of the best form of life and its appreciation as the best form of life for each person. Mill is concerned to defend the idea that this question can be given a right answer and that there is knowledge to be had in respect of how best one ought to live. Mill believed in the idea of moral expertise. Indeed his whole defence of the qualitative distinction amongst pleasures in Chapter 2 of *Utilitarianism* turns on the idea of moral experts who are able to judge qualitatively between pleasures, or more precisely activities that give rise to the sensation of pleasure.[6] Moral expertise is something that each person can in principle acquire through the cultivation of experience and critical reflection. However, at any one time not everyone will count as an expert, so Mill's doctrine of ethics does leave open the possibility of moral elites based on expertise. We shall return to the significance of these elites later on.

It is in this context of seeking the best form of life that Mill's defence of free speech and opinion is developed. Mill is concerned with the acquisition of scientific and moral knowledge as the condition of a good or valuable life. To this end it is imperative that the pursuit of truth in all areas of enquiry is unrestricted as the denial of truth diminishes the stock of value in the world. In the justly famous second chapter of *On Liberty* Mill sums up the case for free expression on the following grounds:

> First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.
>
> Secondly, though the silencing opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.
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> Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will by most of those who

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> receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.[7]

Mill's defence of speech is not merely a defence of the individual to say things that are considered outrageous from the point of view of traditional beliefs and practices. That is certainly the dominant reading of Mill's argument, and it is undoubtedly part of his concern. Since long before Mill's time the Liberal defence of speech, belief, and the press had been concerned with saying what is unpopular or controversial. Yet even more important than this fundamental Liberal concern is Mill's assertion of the need to engage actively in speech and discussion. It is the active exchange of opinions and beliefs and their continual defence against new challenges that Mill is also concerned about, hence his otherwise curious argument that even those beliefs we hold to be certain and uncontroversial should be challenged and defended with new vigour to each person or generation. People should not merely have the right to hold and profess beliefs or engage in private enquiry in the security of their studies. Unless people actively profess, defend and argue for their beliefs the pursuit of knowledge and the task of truth testing cannot take place. The liberty principle once applied to free speech and discussion should not, therefore, be seen as a purely negative restriction on censorship whether this be private or societal. The ideal of liberty of speech and discussion is a much more positive or active ideal that can only arise once the dead hand of censorship and tradition is removed.

Given the importance of diversity of opinion and widespread public discussion of all issues and ideas, it is perhaps misleading as many do, to claim that Mill believed in a market-place of ideas.[8] For although Mill does seem to use the market analogy to describe the way in which settled convictions about the truth emerges through competition with other beliefs and opinions, the market metaphor does not adequately capture the way in which Mill wants to actively encourage participation, debate and discussion. Even the staunchest defender of the free market is unlikely to see participation in market exchange in quite this way. We can, therefore, draw a fairly clear distinction of priority that Mill affords to speech and discussion as a mechanism for the institutional channelling of knowledge and that which he attaches to the price mechanism in a free market.

The contrast between the price-mechanism of the free market and Mill's account of the critical importance of widespread debate and exchange of beliefs turns on his view of the epistemic value of diversity of beliefs as such. The price mechanism attaches differing values to different kinds of goods and services. When it works efficiently it directs resources to the most profitable areas of activity and away from the least profitable, and the price itself serves as a signal of where to invest or spend and where not to. However, although high and low prices signal different information, some goods and services, as signalled by price will be shown to have little or no value and

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therefore the market mechanism should discourage their production. For example there is almost no market currently for Penny Farthing Bicycles so almost none are produced. Yet in Mill's defence of speech and discussion all beliefs and opinions have some utility as such, even if they are clearly false. Even false beliefs have a contribution to make to the pursuit and appreciation of truth. It is not that Mill wants to denigrate the idea of genuine knowledge or truth especially in science and ethics, nor does he have a consensus or pragmatist theory of truth. Mill simply wanted to argue for the epistemic value of diversity of beliefs and opinions even false ones and this valuing of diversity is not simply connected to the idea of discourse and argument as leading to a deliberative account of the public good or interest. Mill's defence of epistemic diversity is indeed instrumental, but it is not instrumental in terms solely of revealing the public interest as many contemporary deliberative theorists suggests. We shall return to the significance of this shortly.

Prices

Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* became the standard textbook on economics until the marginalist revolution in the later nineteenth century, and it conforms to the main outlines of classical theory. Although Mill goes to considerable lengths to add nuance and complexity to the Classical theory he inherited from his father and Ricardo on most fundamental issues he agrees with his forbears. This is most clearly illustrated by his endorsement of the political economy of laissez-faire. While Mill does not develop an ideology of economic liberalism that privileges the role of the market in quite the way that later economic liberals such as Hayek do, he does endorse a respect for the price mechanism as a way of signalling the dispersed information that is necessary for making efficient decisions about resource allocation amongst conflicting ends and demands. Willingness to pay as reflected in the price mechanism is a clear indicator of individual preferences or wants and this in turn is at least one clear indicator of the general interest. As a utilitarian, Mill's defence of market freedom is given in terms of the maximisation of utility rather than in Hayekian epistemological terms, but in essence the arguments are the same, at least up to a point.

That point has become one of the main sites of dispute within liberalism about Mill's canonical status. While Mill follows a broadly laissez-faire attitude to the economy and government policy, and while this can also be seen in his political and social philosophy especially when he discusses controversial questions such us how far the state should be involved in providing education, when he came to discuss questions of distribution in his *Principles of Political Economy* he does suggest that laissez-faire can be abandoned. He claims that the economic laws that apply to production '... partake of the character of physical truths ...' but that 'It is not so with the Distribution of Wealth. That is a matter of human institution merely'.[10] By describing the 'laws' of distribution as a human institution he means that they are a function of the system of property that obtains in a particular society, consequently as those property relations are malleable so the structure and principles of distribution can change. This departure

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is most explicit in later editions of the *Principles* where Mill appears to concede ground to socialist arguments, at least as these applied to the distribution of the product of a Capitalist economy. It should, however, be noted that the concessions that Mill makes to socialist arguments under the influence of his wife Harriet, are hardly significant from the perspective of committed socialists, however dangerous Hayekian liberals may have regarded them. There is little or nothing that would have appeared as a significant concession to the kinds of 'scientific' socialist arguments being developed by Marx or Engels.

The implications of Mill's position in his writings on political economy are ambiguous from the point of view of social epistemology and the problem of epistemic diversity. Whereas Mill adopts a fully laissez-faire attitude to speech and opinion, even to the point of securing the existence of epistemic space for false beliefs, when it comes to the sphere in which laissez-faire is most commonly advocated by classical liberals, he clearly equivocates. His arguments in relation to the Laws of Distribution are that the price mechanism might well serve as a signalling device, but it does not fully indicate the public good or the greatest happiness of the greatest number, and more importantly, this can be derived in other ways that perhaps contradict the dictates of the market. Yet if we probe the question of what alternative mechanisms Mill proposed instead of the market we can see that Mill's social and political commitment to laissez-faire remains pretty strong. And what this suggests is that Mill's primary understanding of the market is not as a signalling mechanism for the greatest happiness of the greatest number or for constituting the public good but as a regime of liberty. When Mill applies a market or laissez-faire policy to the political realm it is clear that his concern is primarily with a fear of Government as a sectional interest rather than with any epistemological thesis about computation or the technical ability of government to construct policies in the public interest. The concern is far less with the technical inability of Government to coordinate the myriad sources of knowledge necessary for policy making. As an heir to Benthamite utilitarianism and government reform Mill is perfectly open to the idea of more efficient and knowledge based policy-making. His concern instead is the more fundamental problem political motivation rather than the technical question of epistemic ability, this is further illustrated in his approach to political institutions and the third mechanism used for transmitting social dispersed information, votes.

Votes

Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government,*[11] is regarded by both liberals and democrats as a deeply unsatisfactory compromise between the conflicting demands of legislative expertise and of representative accountability. Yet it perfectly illustrates Mill's preoccupation with social epistemology and his concern with securing epistemic diversity against the threat of political conformity. Mill's defence of the vote is interesting in this work because it down plays the idea of voting as signalling information or as a way of revealing a preference or judgement in a process of public

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deliberation on the public interest. Instead the vote is used to make a more basic judgement of legitimacy rather than a constitutive judgement about the common good. To explain why Mill sees the vote in participatory rather than deliberative terms we need to go back to an aspect of his moral and political theory discussed earlier.

Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures in the essay *Utilitarianism* introduces the idea of moral expertise.[12] The idea is simply that some people with more knowledge and experience will be able to distinguish between more and less valuable ends. As the more valuable ends will bring about greater happiness in the long run and as Mill continues to endorse the idea of the greatest happiness as the ultimate criterion of value and right action,[13] he faces the question of why these moral experts should not rule and benignly impose the general interest on the less experienced and less knowledgeable. Mill's second classic essay *On Liberty* provides part of the answer to why there should not be rule by such moral experts and this sets the agenda for his democratic theory in *Considerations on Representative Government*. If we return to our brief discussion of *On Liberty* above, it is clear that Mill is sceptical about elite rule for two reasons. The first is the problem of elite selection. Much of Mill's concern about majority tyranny in *On Liberty* is not merely confined to the familiar nineteenth-century worry about democratic levelling and mass man, it is also concerned with the argument of his father James Mill that the rule of a 'representative class' the commercial middle class would best secure the public interest. Mill's concern here, is that the self identification of a social class or group as embodying the public interest or the greatest happiness is dangerous. Mill was sceptical about the virtues of the commercial middle class and far from convinced that they were the moral experts that his father seemed to suggest. The commercial middle class represent all the dangers of self-appointed elites confirming their interest as the public interest, with their conservative and narrow view of social convention. But the most important problem is who identifies the elites or experts and how they are chosen. Mill was a sufficiently sensitive reader of Plato's *Republic* to appreciate the problem of how one can secure rule of experts if the distribution of expert knowledge is not widely shared. This problem was obviously appreciated by those claiming the extension of the franchise throughout Mill's political life, who were far from convinced that the social classes that ruled them were actually the social and political elite in anything but a positional sense. Secondly, Mill was also concerned about the substance of moral expertise. It is one thing to be open to the idea of moral and political experts, but it is quite another thing to identify the content of that expertise, and say precisely what moral and political knowledge consists in: again Mill's concern echoes themes from Plato's *Republic*, with which he would have been familiar through his friendship with George Grote as well as his early education.[14] Both of these issues come together in the arguments of *Considerations on Representative Government*.

On the franchise, Mill adopts an approach more similar to Bentham's conception of representative democracy than to deliberative or constitutive theories of democracy such as those found in Rousseau or more recent democratic theorists. For Bentham the task of the franchise was not to coordinate interests or signal preferences for some

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social choice function, rather it was merely to hold the legislature to account and remove them when they seemed to be acting against the general interest. The votes of the majority were not intended to signal what the general interest was but merely to identify that a particular regime were not acting in accordance with it.

Mill's argument is more subtle than Bentham's in this respect as in most others, yet he still saw the vote primarily as a judgement of legitimacy rather than a signal of judgement about the general interest or greatest happiness. Mill, like Bentham, did not equate the opinion of the majority revealed in a vote with the greatest happiness of the greatest number in all but exceptional cases. Voting remains a checking mechanism for holding the legislature to account and the exercise of the franchise serves an important role in the moral and political education of those who exercise it. But even though Mill thinks that exercising the franchise publicly (as he was against secret ballots) would raise the character and judgement of the electorate, he remained suspicious of the effect of social and economic interests distorting the political process. For this reason he is more concerned with fragmenting dominant social and political interests through devices such as proportional representation and plural voting than he was with issues of deliberation and preference or judgement aggregation. Mill's institutional concern is therefore with undermining stable social majorities and the tendency of democracy towards what he saw as populism. It is in relation to the threat of populism that Mill made his apparently anti-egalitarian concession to plural-voting. The point here is that numbers of votes are distributed according to educational qualifications on the grounds that the more informed and educated electors would be less inclined to support populism and demagogy. Proportional representation, of which Mill was an early advocate, has a similar political value. Far from employing mechanisms to pool information and knowledge, Mill's concern is with mechanisms that ensure political pluralism and diversity. In this respect it is diversity and pluralism as social phenomena that matter to Mill just as they did in his account of free-speech and discussion. Again this is not merely because epistemic diversity is a good that contributes to the criticism and growth of knowledge, rather it is offered as part of the defence against tendencies to social and political conformity.[15] Epistemic diversity provides part of the check on social interests and groups asserting their status as a representative class or as the political elite. So once again when Mill appeals to epistemic diversity it is to support political and social diversity and hence freedom. The defence is cast in political rather than epistemological terms.

However, voting does not only take place in the exercise of the franchise but also within legislatures. It might be argued that in this context Mill's concern is less with the protective role of representative democracy and more with the deliberative role, where voting might well serve as a signalling device or mechanism for transferring dispersed knowledge and expertise.

But even in the context of legislation, Mill seems to avoid appealing to institutional mechanisms as a way of pooling information and knowledge in order to secure the public interest. In *Considerations'* Mill distinguishes the role of elected legislators and the civil service or bureaucracy who initiate and develop policy of the legislature to

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judge and approve. Clearly Mill thought that legislators should be intelligent and wiser than their electorate as this is what ultimately qualifies them to judge on behalf of their electors. That said, he attaches most importance to the civil service or bureaucrats who initiate policy and who will be the genuine political elite. It is the small group or cadre of bureaucrats who serve as the philosopher kings and develop policy based on that expertise, once again illustrating Mill's view that their can be such experts and that there is something for them to be experts in. Deliberation will obviously take place amongst this group as they develop and initiate policy or proposed legislation, but Mill does not provide much discussion of the institutional structures in which this takes place and provides no discussion of mechanisms and structures which might make this more effective. In so far as Mill seems to have a model it is that of open discussion freed from the burdens of having to 'sell' policy to an electorate or having to initiate policy at the behest of a party manifesto. Again the model seems to be the pluralistic and structure-less one that we can find in his defence of free speech and discussion.

Once policy is presented to the legislature for voting and endorsement we might seem to be back with epistemological questions about judgement aggregation and deliberative democracy. Yet even in this case Mill's concern remains largely protective as the role of the legislature is to set checks on the bureaucratic elite acting in its own interest. Mill retains a Benthamite suspicion of government, in any of its dimensions, acting as a sinister interest apart from the general interest, or imposing its interest as the general interest.[16] This does involve the legislature making judgements about the greatest happiness or public interest, but crucially Mill emphasises the checking or legitimating dimension of the judgement, rather than any claim that such judgements when aggregated constitute the greatest happiness. Mill retains a strong liberal scepticism about the institutions of government and their ability to track or constitute the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Obviously, as a utilitarian and not a libertarian, Mill's scepticism is qualified. He like Bentham does not want to regard government as always the enemy and always acting against the general interest. But equally he wants to avoid the idea that a set of institutions can be constructed that would perfectly track the public interest or the greatest happiness. All such institutions will be fallible and therefore they need to be regarded with a healthy scepticism. Whilst they may deliver the greatest happiness of the greatest number, there will always be cases in which they fail to do so. But more important even than this scepticism about social epistemology is Mill's more profound political scepticism. The constant danger that the liberal state must protect against is that a particular social group could colonise and pervert the functioning of such institutions. This is what Bentham feared in characterising government as a sinister interest. The government, including both elected representatives, members of the executive, but also functionaries such as judges and civil servants are unavoidably an interest apart from those they represent or serve and this is because of the way the positions they occupy within the structures of the modern state shape and transform their personal or selfish interests. Bentham arguably failed to provide a full theory of interest and therefore failed to appreciate

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the social forces that manifest themselves through social and political interests. Mill, however, seems to have had a much more acute appreciation of the problems of social interests and the threat they posed to the possibility of a genuinely public interest. This is clearly illustrated at the beginning of the essay *On Liberty* where Mill draws attention to new threats to freedom that cannot be dealt with, as Bentham and all liberals preceding him had hoped, merely by the distribution of civil and political rights. However much we might wish to construct institutions that channel and signal dispersed knowledge the primary concern of liberals must remain a caution about the way in which these institutions can be distorted by factional interests.

One should not over-emphasise Mill's scepticism about the impact of political interests acting against the public interest or the greatest happiness, as he was undoubtedly optimistic about the growth of knowledge.[17] But even this progressive optimism depended upon the growth of the right kind of character amongst the whole population. Politics could play a part in the cultivation of this liberal character and that is certainly one of the concerns underlying the institutional design within *Considerations on Representative Government*, but it is interesting that Mill is concerned primarily with the cultivation of character and dispositions. He remained profoundly wary of the state's involvement in the cultivation of the intellect or in its imparting beliefs and knowledge. For Mill, knowledge was widely dispersed throughout society, but it is important for him that it remained widely dispersed and that it remained difficult for it to be pooled into any one institutional site or structure. Epistemic diversity remained an end to be preserved not overcome.

EPISTEMIC DIVERSITY, MILLIAN SCEPTICISM AND LATER LIBERAL THEORY

The subsequent development of liberal theory in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century can be seen to abandon much that preoccupied Mill. Idealist liberals such as T.H. Green and 'new liberals' such as L.T. Hobhouse took up themes in Mill's later writings and emphasised the social and material conditions of the exercise of freedom as autonomy. Although some of these themes are undoubtedly in Mill, they also drew on continental sources such as Kant in developing a non-naturalistic and perfectionist account of autonomy and freedom. This new tradition came to adopt a much more sympathetic attitude to the state as a condition of freedom and human flourishing.[18] This *rapprochement* with the state as an active condition of freedom and autonomy marked a considerable departure from the sceptical classical tradition that we find in Mill, and provided the opportunity for a restatement of the classical position by mid-twentieth century liberals such as F.A. Hayek. Yet Hayek's classical turn was not the only response to the 'statism' of new liberalism. John Dewey's pragmatist liberal theory shared much with the aspirations of new liberalism yet he retained a Millian scepticism about the reliance on the state and placed more trust in the extension of democracy throughout all aspects of society.

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Hayek and Dewey

Hayek and Dewey are both important liberal philosophers, but apart from sharing that deeply contested title they appear to share very little else in common. Hayek is concerned with providing a modern restatement and defence of the classical liberal laissez-faire policy of small non-interventionist government and a strong free market. Dewey's liberalism is based on a commitment to democracy and experimentation in all social institutions.[19] In many respects Dewey's liberalism is closer to the liberalism of 'new liberal' sociologists such as L. T. Hobhouse in Britain, but he differs in that his pragmatist philosophy places far greater emphasis on social epistemology as the justification for the democratisation of social and political institutions. It is this commitment to social epistemology that ultimately connects Dewey and Hayek, both of whom, unlike Mill, place considerable faith in social epistemology and the institutional dimensions of knowledge production. But as we shall see even that enthusiasm is qualified by the partial acknowledgement of problems raised by Mill.

Throughout his work, F.A. Hayek develops an argument for the free market in terms of institutional or social epistemology. As a young man he abandoned his early sympathy for social democracy under the influence of Ludwig von Mises's critique of socialism for its inability to mirror the complex information processing structure of the free market.[20] The effect of the calculation debate remained central to Hayek's later defence of the free market and his critique of the welfare state as a stage on the 'Road to Serfdom'. In many of his works this criticism takes on a polemical tone, but underlying that was a serious analysis of the way in which institutions could serve an epistemological goal.[21] For Hayek the problem that socialist planners failed to adequately address was the problem of efficiently allocating resources in a centrally planned economy. No central state body was able to gather the widely dispersed knowledge and information necessary to solve the problem of efficient resource allocation, however the free market provided such a mechanism through the price mechanism. Prices signalled dispersed information to the myriad producers and consumers throughout the market. As long as allocative decisions were left to an unrestricted market the consequences of its function were by definition the most efficient outcomes. More importantly for Hayek there was no further independent criterion such as the general happiness or the public interest against which market allocations could be assessed, as the formation of these criteria would either need to be self evident or themselves the product of some decision making process that pooled the dispersed information of all those concerned. And given that a government could not provide such an efficient allocation it would have to impose an arbitrary one. That is why even the well-meaning desires of western social democrats left us on the road to totalitarian serfdom. In this way Hayek's critique of non market based distributive principles mirrors Michael Oakeshott's criticism of the consequences of rationalism in politics, namely it imposes an arbitrary and partial political settlement on the complex of individual social and political decisions. Governing parties, however well-meaning, could not by definition know the best way to structure outcomes that

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could only be revealed through the price mechanism and would therefore have to rely on their own arbitrary prescriptions. These prescriptions would have no obvious normative authority other than that they reflected the interests of the groups holding political power. And it is for this reason that Hayek adopts a classical liberal scepticism about the state as a source of social justice or a guide to the good life. His argument appears to reflect Mill's concern about the way the state can be colonised by social and political interests masquerading as moral and political experts. However, Hayek's argument is stronger than Mill's in that Mill does at least allow that there can be such moral and political experts even if we have difficulty selecting them from groups who make bogus claims to be experts, such as religious authorities. For Hayek's stronger claim is that there could not be such experts as they would have to have some way of collating and processing dispersed knowledge and information in the same way that markets do and the epistemological analysis of the market renders that prospect impossible.

It is precisely because Mill seems to allow for the prospect of moral expertise that those influenced by Hayek's arguments are suspicious of his arguments. Mill acknowledged that the state could be colonised by sectional or sinister interests, but he always held out the prospect that some group could emerge that would indeed be able to offer its expertise to rule wisely and efficiently. This suspicion was compounded by Mill's abandonment of classical liberal orthodoxy over the matter of economic distribution. For Hayekians, Mill's distinction between questions of production and distribution is simply a mistake and failed to acknowledge the ways in which distributive decisions of markets were themselves important indicators of dispersed knowledge. To remove distributive decisions from the nexus of market decision-making would both distort the epistemological function of markets and interpose an arbitrary and normatively groundless political decision in their stead.

This Hayekian brand of epistemological liberalism persists in contemporary political philosophy, most recently in Chandran Kukathas' contribution to the debate about multiculturalism. For Kukathas, the attempt to impose a conception of group solidarity on the diverse cultural groups in modern liberal societies is to assume that one model of cultural integration can be distinguished from the myriad values and beliefs of such groups. Even liberal norms of equality would themselves form partial impositions on the diversity of society that emerges from the market in beliefs, practices and values. For Kukathas an appropriate response to societal diversity in a robust form of benign neglect, whereby groups are able to get on with what they do in their own terms, with the only condition being that they do not prevent the physical exit of members who no longer wish to accept the associative obligations of group membership. Groups are not required to make exit easy, but as long as they do not prevent it by imprisoning members or putting physical obstacles in the way of members they should be left to do as they wish.

Kukathas's classical liberal vision of multiculturalism owes much to Hayek's argument and differs considerably from the kind of liberalism advocated by Mill. Yet in important respects it also illustrates how Hayek's more sceptical classical liberalism

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and his commitment to social epistemology runs into conflict with the Millian requirement to maintain epistemic diversity.

For Mill the maintenance of epistemic diversity became a more pressing concern than the construction of a social or institutional epistemology. Epistemic diversity remained a good in itself as part of the conditions of social and political progress and was not primarily seen as a problem to be overcome in constructing a conception of the general interest. For Hayek, and for Kukathas, the epistemological argument remained the basis for liberalism. However the consequences of their epistemological approach is a more thorough-going scepticism that in the end becomes self-undermining.

In the case of Hayek's argument there is no acknowledgement that markets can fail in their information-signalling role. He famously has a problem with the issue of the growth of monopolies and monopoly distortion of free markets and consequently the way in which markets can be sites of power and influence as much as information signalling devices. This can be illustrated in the case of Kukathas's Hayekian multi-culturalism. Many minority cultural groups have sought group recognition and group specific rights and entitlements to defend themselves from the dominance of majority cultural practices. These provisions can be claimed as a matter of right when they are seen as a response to the coercive imposition of majority practices by former colonial states.[23] The same argument might also be extended to decisions by minority linguistic communities to defend themselves against the consequences of economic and cultural globalisation. In the face of the dominant power of some cultures others become swamped and disappear. For Kukathas and presumably Hayek, this is a neutral process that follows the choices of individuals to choose the lives they prefer when confronted with alternatives. If everyone chooses Coca-Cola, Macdonalds and MTV, that will merely prove that they are genuinely more attractive than whatever is offered by minority communities. Cultural diversity is not a good in itself that should be coercively maintained, and to try and do so would be imposing one person or group's controversial conception of what is valuable on everyone else. But one consequence of this *laissez-faire* approach is that Hayek and Kukathas's strong epistemological scepticism potentially conflicts with epistemic diversity of the sort that Mill valued so highly, with the consequence that a market of ideas and values of this sort might end up with only a very few perspectives surviving. Hayek's market driven social and institutional epistemology potentially undercuts epistemic diversity because unlike Mill it only acknowledges government or the state as a distorting institution. As long as the state is not interfering intervening in market decisions then these will serve their appropriate epistemological purpose. Yet Mill acknowledged at the very beginning of *On Liberty* that government was not the only threat to liberty in all its guises but that social forces could also threaten social and political as well as epistemic diversity. Unlike Hayek's epistemological argument for the market, Mill attaches no special epistemological authority to any institution, therefore his theory has no problem with the idea that dominant power can be exercised by economic interests just as much as social and political interests, and that these can undermine the epistemological function of the market. Mill would therefore be far from sanguine about Kukathas's

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Hayekian disregard for cultural diversity in the face of economic globalisation.

Hayek's failure to acknowledge that a laissez-faire approach to markets might undermine the very epistemological defence of market institutions can be contrasted with John Dewey's more thoroughgoing approach to social epistemology.

Where Hayek placed all his emphasis on the price mechanism as an information pooling and signalling device, Dewey directed his attention to democracy and its commitment to voting and speech and deliberation. In the process of democratic deliberation citizens were engaged in a large scale process of experimentation in which various proposed solutions to social and political problems are rehearsed and their potential consequences assessed.[24] In favouring deliberation Dewey draws on the idea of dispersed practical intelligence that is brought to bear through the cooperative engagement between citizens, representatives and state and bureaucratic functionaries. Democratic deliberation of this kind is also revisable in the light of disconfirmation and new evidence, so that policies that fail or do not work as expected can be changed. Deliberation is a discovery method and as with experimentalism in natural science, it is the method as much as the substantive beliefs generated by it that matters.

Like Hayek and Mill, Dewey's conception of practical intelligence involves the belief that knowledge and information is often unarticulated and widely dispersed in society, it is not merely held by an educated intellectual and cultural elite. It is therefore important that all voices are heard and that no particular set of voices dominates discussion. For this reason Dewey's experimentalist approach to deliberation is strongly connected with his idea of democratic equality. All voices should be included in the deliberative process in order for collective decision making to serve the knowledge gathering process of public deliberation. Every individual and social group has a distinct perspective that is important for genuine public deliberation. The exclusion or distortion of such views of voices is no different from the falsification of evidence in natural science, and it casts doubt on the view that the outcomes of democratic deliberation genuinely constitute the public interest.

Dewey acknowledges the importance of democratising the state and developing further opportunities for voting and deliberation within state structures, but he also acknowledges that for his ideal of democracy as social experiment to work it could not simply focus on such state structures. Instead democracy requires that all individuals adopt the ethos of deliberation, experiment and recognition of diversity in all aspects of their civil lives. Democracy requires a democratic civil society as well as a legal and constitutional structure. And this involves the development and nurturing of parties and associations that embody the claims of individuals and group members dispersed throughout society. It also involves a genuine ethos of toleration of diversity and openness to different opinions. This will require political control over groups and factions that try and distort free communication or who silence debate and deliberation because of their control of organs of the state or through the monopoly ownership in the press and media. Unlike Hayek, Dewey is prepared to see the outcomes of a free market in the press and media as great a potential threat to deliberation and social experimentation as state control. For Dewey, Randolph Hearst (or in our own day

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Rupert Murdoch) could be just as great a threat to democracy through his monopoly control of opinion, as he could be an assistance to democracy through holding the state to account. It is partly this aspect of Dewey's thought that has made him attractive to contemporary thinkers.[25] Yet Dewey was also aware that democratic deliberation could increase opportunities for conflict as well as knowledge gathering and information pooling. The liberal character of his conception of democracy is often forcefully asserted in his writings:

> Intolerance, abuse, calling of names because of differences of opinion about religion or politics or business, as well as because of differences of race, color, wealth or degree of culture are treason to the democratic way of life. For everything which bars freedom and fullness of communication sets up barriers that divide human being into sets and cliques, into antagonistic sects and factions, and thereby undermines the democratic way of life. Merely legal guarantees of the civil liberties of free belief, free expression, and free assembly are of little avail if in daily life freedom of communication, the give and take of ideas, facts, experiences, is choked by mutual suspicion, by abuse, by fear and hatred.[26]

In many ways, Dewey's democratic philosophy mirrors aspects of Mill's defence of epistemic diversity. Dewey is much more optimistic than Mill about democracy as a discovery procedure, but he is similarly concerned, in a way that Hayek is not, with the requirements of maintaining epistemic diversity. Dewey's conception of practical intelligence requires both the idea of dispersed knowledge of what works and what does not. Failure, error and untruth remain important for Dewey just as they did for Mill, as error plays an important role in the progress of knowledge.

Yet given Dewey's acknowledgement of social forces and institutions that can frustrate democracy, and his account of those values and beliefs that silence debate or recognition, such as differences over race, culture and religious belief, he has a problem accounting for terms of inclusion and principles that rule some beliefs and values into debate as part of legitimate diversity and those beliefs that fail to count as legitimate contributions to debate. For Dewey, unlike Mill, the solution to these problems is more democracy, but that seems to beg the question, as the problem faced in defending deliberative conceptions of democracy concerns deliberation amongst whom?[27]

Unlike Dewey, Mill's response to this problem is to opt for a liberal defence of epistemic diversity over a democratic social epistemology, and to rely on a non-democratic or non-deliberative account of the norms of inclusion that protect this account of epistemic diversity. For Mill, the non-deliberative account of the norm of inclusion is provided by his utilitarian theory and his utilitarian commitment to the principle of liberty. In other words, Mill asserts the priority of philosophy over democracy.

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Conclusion: Political Liberalism and the Abandonment of Epistemology?

By way of conclusion we can see that contemporary political liberalism has abandoned the epistemological turn chosen by Hayek and Dewey and returned to a liberal stance more closely associated with Mill's scepticism about the merits of social epistemology. Liberal theory since the publication of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, has deliberately avoided the preoccupation with social epistemology found in mid-century liberals such as Hayek or Dewey. This lack of interest in social epistemology and political liberalism's more general 'epistemic abstinence'[28] might simply reflect an acknowledgement of the academic division of labour, whereby political philosophers such as Rawls focus on the justification of normative principles, whereas social scientists engage in the kinds of questions that Hayek or Dewey were concerned with. There is something in this idea and the related claims that Hayek became too much of a political philosopher and not enough of an economist, or that Dewey's philosophy drew too eclectically from a variety of disciplines. Yet there is more to the argument than recognition of the claims of economics, social psychology and empirical political science.

The abandonment of epistemology embodied in the political liberal aspiration to provide a neutral defence of liberal principles, involves not just the recognition of the difficulty of establishing consensus around a particular conception of the good.[29] It also involves a recognition of the fact of social and epistemic diversity, and the undesirability of eradicating it, even though Rawls like Mill is not committed to conceding the truth or rightness of any or all current conceptions of the good held in a plural liberal society.

Of course, this does not mean that anything goes. Maintaining diversity involves the distribution of sets of rights, liberties and bundles of resources that enables individuals to pursue their own conceptions of the good. In this respect Rawlsian political liberalism is consistent with both Mill and Dewey, though not Hayek. However, where contemporary political liberalism departs from the epistemological liberalism of Dewey or contemporary deliberative democrats influenced by him, is in the Millian commitment to the primacy of liberal political philosophy over democracy. In this respect contemporary political liberalism, like Mill's utilitarian liberalism, remains wedded to the priority of normative political philosophy over epistemology. This remains one of its greatest strengths and one of its most formidable challenges.

Notes

1 This criticism goes back to the late nineteenth century and is repeated by Hayek and by liberals inspired by him. See J. Gray, *Liberalism*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1986, p. 30.

2 For the origins of the contemporary view that liberalism and utilitarianism are incompatible see J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 22–27.

3 See J.S. Mill, *An Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*, *The Collected Works of*

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John Stuart Mill, vol. ix., London, Routledge, 1979, [1865].

[4] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* in *Essays on Politics and Society The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. xviii., London, Routledge, 1977, [1859].

[5] That Mill thought this conception of moral truth might be pluralistic, albeit within a utilitarian justificatory framework, see J. Riley, 'Defending Cultural Pluralism Within Liberal Limits' *Political Theory*, vol. 30, (2002), pp. 68–96 and 'On Quantities and Qualities of Pleasure', *Utilitas*, vol. 5, (1993), 291–300.

[6] J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* in *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. x., London, Routledge, 1969, [1861].

[7] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, *CW* xviii., p. 258.

[8] A. Haworth, *Free Speech*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 68.

[9] J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vols. II and III, London, Routledge, 1965.

[10] J.S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, *CW* vol. 2, p. 199.

[11] J.S. Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, *Essays on Politics and Society*, *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. xix, London, Routledge, 1977.

[12] J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, *CW*. vol. x., p. 211.

[13] For a lucid exposition of Mill's utilitarianism see R. Crisp, *Mill's Utilitarianism*, London, Routledge, 1997.

[14] The Victorian preoccupation with Plato was not unique to Mill, but was prevalent amongst many of the great minds of the mid to late nineteenth-century. See B. Schultz, *Henry Sidgwick: Eye of the Universe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

[15] Mill does believe in social unity as solidarity; hence in his controversial argument in *Considerations* for a sense of national identity as underpinning his democratic institutions, he writes 'It is in general a necessary condition of free institutions that the boundaries of government should coincide in the main with those of nationalities.' *Considerations*, *CW*, Chap. 16. However, it is equally clear that he believes this sense of national solidarity must coincide with considerable diversity if it is to remain a free society. National identity and solidarity are not sufficient conditions of a free society.

[16] For a subtle comparison and contrast of Mill and Bentham on democracy see F. Rosen, *Jeremy Bentham and Representative Democracy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983, pp. 183–199.

[17] Mill is not after all John Gray who regards Mill's belief in progress as a groundless illusion based on nothing more than a wager, see J. Gray, *Mill On Liberty, A Defence*, London, Routledge, 1983.

[18] See M. Freeden, *The New Liberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978. and J. Gray, *Liberalism*, pp. 32–4.

[19] On Dewey's liberalism see Robert C. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993, and Steven C. Rockerfeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1994.

[20] For an overview of Hayek's thought see A. Gamble, *Hayek: The Iron Cage of Liberty*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996.

[21] F.A. Hayek, 'The use of knowledge in society', in *Individualism and Economic Order*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1948, pp. 77–91.

[22] C. Kukathas, *The Liberal Archipelago*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2003.

[23] This argument is used by Will Kymlicka to defend the self-government rights of national minorities in his book *Multicultural Citizenship*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995.

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[24] See J. Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925–1953*, vol. 2., ed. J.A. Boydston, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1981, pp. 235–372.

[25] See H. Putnam, 'A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy', *Southern California Law Review*, vol. 63, (1990), pp. 1671–97.

[26] J. Dewey, *Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us*, in *The Later Works of John Dewey. 1925–1953*, vol. 14: 1939–41, ed. J.A. Boydston, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1981, pp. 227–8.

[27] This problem is appreciated by those who criticise deliberative democracy such as Chandran Kukathas in *The Liberal Archipelago*, as well as by those who are more sympathetic to it such as Iris Marion Young. See *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

[28] See T. Nagel, 'Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 16, (1987), pp. 215–40.

[29] A fact exemplified in Rawls's thesis about the burdens of judgement, see J. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 54–7.

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