

Revisiting J.S. Mill's Case for Civil Dialogue in the Age of Partisan Division:
Its Utility in Teaching Political Theory

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“Education, in its largest sense, is one of the most inexhaustible of all topics,” John Stuart Mill declared in his three-hour *Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews* (1867). It is, along with government and politics, one of the subjects he thought, “no thoughtful person finds any lack of things both great and small still to be said,” and, like other public matters, should be “considered by various minds, and from a variety of points of view.”¹ Commonly attributed to Mill is an unwavering faith that truth, in the end, will eventually emerge in modern society from the marketplace of ideas. However, this passes lightly over his pessimism concerning the current state of public opinion of his time, and his doubts about truth being triumphant in the marketplace, let alone its capacity to provide an education, broadly conceived.² Mill recognized the influence of the marketplace of ideas in shaping tastes—social, political or cultural and, in this sense, it provided ‘an education,’ but “a very bad education it often is.” He was, to say the least, less than enthusiastic about the plethora of mass-produced books and newspapers. His (like ours) is “a reading age,” but it has, for the most part, failed to advance human character and self-development. Mill writes in his essay, “On Civilization,”

precisely because it is so reading an age, any book which is the result of profound meditation is perhaps less likely to be duly and profitably read than at a former period. The world reads too much and too quickly to read well. When books were few, to get through one was a work of time and

¹ J.S. Mill, *Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrews*, London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867, p. 3-4.

² And his indictment of “the growth, both in the world of trade and that of intellect, of quackery, and especially of puffing,” still resonates with the current stress in higher education on “marketable” skills. “But nobody,” Mill laments, “seems to have remarked that these are the inevitable fruits of immense competition; of a state of society, where any voice, not pitched in an exaggerated key, depends, not upon what a person is, but upon what he seems: mere marketable qualities become the object instead of substantial ones, and a man’s labor and capital are expended less in doing anything than in persuading other people that he has done it,” *ibid*, (1836), p. 209.

labor: what was written with thought was read with thought, and with a desire to extract from it as much of the materials of knowledge as possible. . . . It is difficult to know what to read, except by reading everything; and so much of the world's business is not transacted through the press, that it is necessary to know what is printed, if we desire to know what is going on. Opinion weighs with so vast a weight in the balance of events, that ideas of no value in themselves are of importance from the mere circumstances that they *are* ideas, and have a *bona-fide* existence as such anywhere out of Bedlam. The world, in consequence, gorges itself with intellectual food; and, in order to swallow the more, *bolts* it.³

'Reading too much, too quickly,' Mill warns, not only hinders the ability to think clearly and critically in the conduct of our private affairs, but also undermines public life and democratic politics. Sounding akin conservative opponents, he writes, "the public finds itself in the predicament of an indolent man, who cannot bring himself to apply his mind vigorously to his own affairs, and over whom, therefore not he who speaks most wisely, but who speaks most frequently, obtains influence."⁴ (One can only imagine what he would make of Twitter and Facebook.) However, it would be a mistake to infer from his indictment that Mill was opposed to democracy. While modifying the universality of his father's arguments, J.S. Mill found in the democratic process something of an 'educative' value. In his *Representative Government*, Mill acknowledges that participatory democratic institutions are agents of 'national education.' He sees the function of democracy as one essential avenue for individual growth and character development, or what T.H. Green, a fellow liberal reformer, refers to as an ability to 'make the most of oneself.' At the same time, Mill recognized that democratic deliberation requires a citizenry who have developed the habit of critical self-reflection and willingness to consider opposing points of views, which he thought necessary for making informed judgements on social policy. His dilemma, consequently, springs from a conflict between his belief in the value of vigorous public debate, while, at the same time, acknowledging that some kinds of group social interactions, especially those involving peoples' views on political and moral issues, can quickly become subtly—and often not so subtly coercive.

³ John Stuart Mill, "On Civilization" (1836), in *Dissertations and Discourses I*, Boston: William V. Spencer, 1865, p. 211.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

In fact, Mill's dilemma is one we continue to wrestle with today. It is not simply the tyranny of princes, but, presently, deeply polarized partisan affiliations expressed in virtual communities, confirming rather the refuting one's social and political beliefs that we must now be on guard.⁵ Given his liberal credentials, we might expect Mill to offer a way out of this predicament. However, applying his philosophy of tolerance and open-mindedness may be easier said than done—and this despite our being aware of “micro-aggression,” “confirmation bias,” “lateral discrimination” and their effects on limiting free expression and critical inquiry. Even those sympathetic to his position find “Mill's emancipatory vision of education for freedom and democracy still unattained,” and maybe even unattainable.⁶ Nevertheless, given our present politics of division, it seems worthwhile to revisit Mill's writings for insights into the educational purpose of vigorous civil discourse, its potential for developing the skills of critical analytical inquiry, and how we, as teachers, can promote it in our classrooms. Doing so, can also shed light on the possibilities and the limitations of putting his philosophy into practice.

I. Education for Self-Development, Diversity & Political Discourse

At the time John Stuart Mill reflected on his early education in his *Autobiography* (1873), he had already completed *A System of Logic* (1843), *On Liberty* (1853), and *Utilitarianism* (1863), along with several other essays that, directly or indirectly, address the importance of education for individual development and creating a culture of democratic tolerance. As chronicled in his *Autobiography*, John Stuart Mill was the product of his father's rigorous liberal arts curriculum of study. James Mill provided his remarkable son with an equally remarkable, (if not excessive) daily program of instruction. Determined to make his son the very model of a ‘perfect thinking machine,’

⁵ Many academics and pundits continue to raise alarm over the dangerous mix of xenophobia, racism and authoritarianism arising in many right-wing populist movements today. In a paper delivered at that at the 2019 International Society of Political Psychologists, Shawn Rosenberg forewarned of an irreversible demise of democracy. “The majority of Americans,” he declared “are generally unable to understand or value democratic culture, institutions, practices or citizenship in the manner required.”

⁶ Wendy Donner, “John Stuart Mill on Education and Democracy,” *J.S. Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, eds. Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 250-274, p. 273.

J.S. Mill, at an early age, was reading classical works of philosophy, economics and mathematics, and given the task of writing treatises on Plato's dialogues. James Mill encouraged his son to think for himself, by giving "his explanations not before, but after, (his son) had felt the full force of the difficulties."⁷ The guiding principle of his father's pedagogy was, as Mill recalled, "to make understanding not only go along with every step of the teaching, but, if possible proceed it." "Anything which could be found out by thinking, I never was told, until I had exhausted my efforts to find it out for myself."⁸ His extensive home-schooling not only instilled the value of independent thought, but also meant Mill had little, if any, attachment to British educational institutions and traditions.

Unlike many of the governing and intellectual elites, who attended institutions of higher education, such as Cambridge and Oxford, and for whom education was an extension of their social status, J.S. Mill neither attended nor was affiliated with any public school or university. (Today, we might consider him a public intellectual, one who stands outside of the social establishment.) As a result, Mill had no qualms about condemning what he saw as antiquated academic practices that instill complacency and discourage freedom of thought. Criticizing what he calls "academical education," Mill denounces the "education of cram," filling students "with mere facts, and with the opinions or phrases of other people," which are often "accepted as substitute for the power to form opinions of (one's) own. . ." The object of what passes for education, he continues, "is, not to qualify the pupil for judging what is true or what is right, but to provide that he shall think true what we think true, and right what we think right; that to teach, means to inculcate our own opinions; and that our business is, not to make thinkers or inquirers, but disciples."⁹ On the contrary, the true objective of an education, Mill reminded his readers,

is to call forth the greatest possible quantity of intellectual *power*, and to inspire the intensest *love of truth*; and this without a particle of regard to the results to which the exercise of that power may lead, even though it should conduct the pupil to opinions diametrically opposite to those of his teachers. . . . intellectual

⁷ On a few occasions, J.S. Mill even "altered (his father's) opinion on some point of detail. . .," see J.S. Mill, *Autobiography of John Stuart Mill*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1924, p. 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 2

⁹ *On Civilization*, p. 222.

power and practical love of truth are alike impossible where the reasoner is shown his conclusions, and informed beforehand that is he expected to arrive at them.¹⁰

Similarly, Mill's emphasis on educating individuals in critical thinking is expressed in his *On Liberty*. In that famous essay, he argues that conformity to the customary is antagonistic to self-development and truth-seeking (which, implicitly, are knit together in Mill's argument), because "to conform to a custom merely *as* a custom does not educate or develop in him any of the qualities which are the distinct endowment of a human being." What constitutes 'distinct human endowment'—"judgement, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and moral preference"—are, according to Mill, fundamental to living in an open democratic society. They are, he maintains, "our mental and moral powers," which "are, like the muscular, improved by being used," and "are called into no existence by doing a thing merely because others do it, no more than by believing a thing only because others believe it."¹¹ A cornerstone of his theory of education as well as his defense of liberty, is Mill's emphasis on robust discussion and a civil exchange of opposing points of view. If such exchanges are to take place in the classroom, then teachers must do more than merely explain historical events, or outline major tenets of economic theory, or describe, a political theorist's view of the human nature. There must be spontaneous debate over historical, economic and political truths, including the meaning of truth itself. "Very few facts are able to tell their own story, without comments to bring out their meaning."¹² For this reason, Mill reckons it is undesirable (as it is probably unrealistic) for a teacher to refrain from presenting her "opinions as true one," and exerting her "utmost powers to exhibit their truth in the strongest light." "To abstain from this," Mill continues,

would be to nourish the worse intellectual habit of all,—that of not finding, and not looking for, certainty in anything. But the teacher himself (or herself) should not be held to any creed; nor should the question be, whether his (or her) own opinions are the true ones, but whether (s)he is well instructed in those of other people, and, in enforcing his (or her) own, states the arguments for all conflicting

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 227

¹¹ *On Liberty*, p. 71

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

opinions fairly. . .As a general rule, the most distinguished teacher (should be) selected, whatever be his (or her) particular views; and (s)he teaches in the spirit of free inquiry, not dogmatic imposition.¹³

Such free inquiry and liberty of thought are essentially interwoven with his more expansive utilitarian philosophy. Human happiness becomes the by-product of the habitual exercise of the intellectual and moral faculties. “His utilitarianism,” as commentators points out, “is more centered on character and ways of life than that of his predecessors and less excessively focused on moral obligation.”¹⁴ Above all, Mill’s characterization of education as a means for cultivating the individual’s intellectual and moral faculties, demands that we—whether as teachers, students and citizens—be clear in our thinking and in articulating standards for judging the merits of one opinion (or theory) against another, determining truth from falsehood.

Of course, Mill is aware that developing an ability to think for ourselves and exercise independent judgements is very much dependent on others around us. While critics often point out J.S. Mill’s “excessive individualistic” philosophy, privileging the autonomous “self” over other social goods, his main concern in *On Liberty* focuses on the human need for others, “the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures.” His familiarity with de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in American*, undoubtedly, made Mill aware of (unmistakably American) characteristics of a democratic society and its fault lines; namely, the duality in our strong desire for autonomy and self-reliance with the equally strong desire for a meaningful life shared with others in the context of community. Together we celebrate our separateness while, at the same time, constantly looking over our shoulder at what other people are doing. Rather, Mill wants men and women, whether pursuing their areas of study or their vocations in life, to ask themselves: “What do I prefer, or what would suit my character and disposition?” Unfortunately, he finds that most people, most of the time, ask themselves:

¹³ “On Civilization,” pp. 227-228.

¹⁴ Wendy Donner, “John Stuart Mill on Education and Democracy,” *J.S. Mill’s Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, eds. Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 250-274, p. 254.

What is suitable to my position? What is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? Or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? . . .It does not occur to them to have any inclination except for what is customary. Thus, the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done . . .”¹⁵

The problem for Mill, in other words, is people not only ‘like in crowds,’ they ‘think in crowds.’ To upend conformity to social convention and group affiliations, he proposes education, narrowly and broadly conceived, that will provide the individual with the opportunity to engage with a variety of people, who hold a *wide variety of opinions* on a wide variety of subjects. If this was not daunting enough (especially residing in Montana), Mill prefers the individual acquire *more* than a second-hand familiarity with a variety of opinions, ways of living and judging. “Nor is it enough,” he writes:

that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. That is not the way to do justice to the arguments or bring them into real contact with his own mind. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them, who defend them in earnest and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of, else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and remove the difficulty.¹⁶

Apparently, Mill hoped that mere exposure to a great diversity of opinion and ways of living would prompt one to question received opinion, “to interrogate one’s own conscious, to observe and experiment on himself,”¹⁷ which, I take him to mean, that when confronted with evidence and argument, one will be open to adopting a new point of view, or another way of understanding the world of politics and society. Or in contemporary lingo, knowledge of the diversity in customs, opinions, ways of living will promote “agile” thinkers. Consider, he says, one “who has never been out of his family circle: he

¹⁵ *On Liberty*, p. 74.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁷ “On Civilization,” p. 230.

never dreams of any other opinions or ways of thinking than those he has been bred up in; . . . If his family are Tory, he cannot conceive the possibility of being a Liberal; if Liberal, of being a Tory.”¹⁸ Evidently, Mill is not just asking us (and our students) to be open-minded to a wide variety of political and moral opinions, many of which differ from ours; he is suggesting there is no other means available for understanding our world and ourselves. Only by way of debating with others and *questioning* one’s own truths can the individual develop as a “progressive being” in a social, political and cultural context.

Consequently, Mill will recognize that exercising “the mental and moral powers” is inexorably linked with social and political life. Merely living in society—the daily interactions with co-workers, teachers, friends, family members and fellow citizens—entails a continuous learning process, and this is particularly highlighted in his broad notion of education. Ideally for Mill, participating in public life requires developing higher order individual capacities of analytical thinking, critical awareness, courage, imagination and calm reflection.¹⁹ We may not discover ‘great general truths,’ but, he concedes, all of us need to know what is true so we may be able to judge between conflicting opinions offered to us as ‘vital truths.’ We need to the ‘mental powers’ to judge for ourselves, says Mill, “whether we ought to be Tories, Whigs, or Radicals, or to what length it is our duty to go with each; to form a rational conviction on great questions of legislation and internal policy, and on the manner in which our country should behaves. . .to foreign nations.”²⁰ What we need, therefore, is a secondary education that develops our understanding of ‘the methods at getting at truth’ through reason and observation, and understanding the ways of knowing necessary for carrying on civil discourse about the nature of politics, morality, and even truth itself.

While he acknowledges the importance of a university education for individual intellectual growth and social progress, Mill did not think that one could learn all there was to know about government and society from a text-book or, for that matter, that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁹ His notion of education is not limited to formal university “adult education,” (although one imagines him as an enthusiastic supporter of Osher Livelong Learning Institutes). What makes Mill’s philosophy of education stand out for many scholars, including Donner, is that learning does not just come from schools and universities alone, but from “an astonishing variety of domains of everyday life; see Donner, p. 219.

²⁰ *Inaugural Address*, p. 43.

education for citizenship ends with the completion of a degree in political science. A mature J.S. Mill had become skeptical of Bentham's and his father's simple utilitarian faith that a comprehensive and definitive 'science of man' and society was close at hand. As Mill reminded the audience at St. Andrews:

Government and civil society are the most complicated of all subjects accessible to the human mind: and he who would deal competently with them as a thinker, and not as a blind follower of a party, requires not only a general knowledge of the leading facts of life, both moral and material, but an understanding exercised and disciplined in the *principles and rules of sound thinking*, up to a point which neither the experience of life, nor any one science or branch of knowledge, affords."²¹

What he thought a liberal arts education could provide was a program of general instruction "bearing on the duties of citizenship," including (but not limited to) studying the outlines of civil and political institutions, domestic and international law, political economy, philosophy and ethics.²² A foundational knowledge of human affairs, society, government, public law, and "the different standards of right and wrong," according to Mill, was an "essential duty of every nation" and of every person in it, "whose voice and feeling form part of what is called public opinion."²³ Akin to those who advocate for general education courses, he denounces limiting university studies to very specialized fields on inquiry or focusing exclusively on skills-based knowledge. Narrow specialization, Mill warns, creates narrow thinking; least we forget, Mill adds, "we are human beings before we are lawyers, or physicians or merchants, or manufacturers."²⁴ And if we are made "thoughtful and capable human beings by general education," then we will be thoughtful and capable *citizens* as well. He concludes, consequently, that what

²¹ Italics added, *Ibid.*, *Inaugural Address*, p. 19.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 81. In his *Inaugural Address*, Mill further outlines a familiar general education curriculum for 'enlightened citizenship,' including studies in languages, politics, philosophy, law, ethics, history, logic, mathematics, sciences, fine arts, and comparative religious studies.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

is most important for students to learn—as thoughtful and capable professionals, citizens, and human beings—is how to be their own teachers.²⁵

In sum, Mill came to believe that the purpose of a university education is not simply to acquire knowledge, which may be forgotten years later, but, more importantly, for individual self-development. His notion of self-development rests on an ideal notion of the self, one that does not intrude, but advances the moral interests of others, a ‘self’ with social and political affiliations. Central to the distinctive Millian notion of education for advancing a socio-political self-development is cultivating particular “habits and powers of the mind,” or what I refer to as ‘arts and habits,’ which he considered essential for sound thinking about human affairs. Many of these ‘arts and habits’ are suggested, explicitly and implicitly, in *On Liberty*, when Mill defends the value of individuality and, most notably in his *Inaugural Address*, in which he outlines a traditional liberal arts education and its value; specifically, they include developing *the habit of careful reading and attention to detail, the habit of recognizing nuance in the use of language, the art of dissecting an argument and identifying where the fallacy lay, the art of expressing oneself clearly, the habit of raising thought-provoking questions, the art of entering into another person’s thoughts, the habit of submitting to refutation, and the art of assuming a new intellectual position*. Although he recognizes the importance of developing these ‘mental powers’ for individual growth, Mill did not limit their value solely to ‘self-development.’ In *On Liberty*, he considers the cultivating such ‘arts and habits’ as essential to an open democratic society and “the particular training of a citizen . . . (for) taking them out of the narrow circle of personal and family selfishness, and accustoming them to the comprehension of the joint interests, the management of joint concerns—habituating them to act from public or semi-public motives, and guide their conduct by aims which unit instead of isolating them from one another.” Without these arts and habits, he concludes, “a free constitution can neither be worked or preserved. . .”²⁶

²⁵ As Stephen Collini aptly notes, “one could without strain regard his whole notion of political activity itself as an extended and strenuous adult-education course;” see his Introduction, “*J.S. Mill’s Essays on Equality, Law, and Education*: Collected Works XXI, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984, pp. viii-lvii, p. viii.

²⁶ *On Liberty*, p. 134.

Armed with a liberal optimism, he never doubted that these ‘arts and habits’ could be taught and, since he suggests they are best acquired through civil discourse, a tutorial seminar would seem to be the most effective approach for promoting them. “Let us,” Mill counsels, “try what conscientious and intelligent teaching can do, before we presume to decide it cannot be done.”²⁷ In that spirit, let us consider how and to what effect the core values of his philosophy of education might be implemented in a 21st century political theory Socratic-tutorial.

II. An Application: the Tutorial Method in an Age of Laptops

At the time J.S. Mill delivered his *Inaugural Address* at St. Andrews, the tutorial system had become a preeminent feature of British university education. A contemporary of J.S. Mill, Professor Benjamin Jowett (1817-1893), revered for his translation of Plato’s dialogues and Master of Balliol College at the University of Oxford, formalize the Socratic discussion-based tutorial with its individual focus and distinct method of fostering dialogue, debate, and independent thought.²⁸ Although it seems complimentary with the value in the free exchange of ideas, the traditional Oxford tutorial consisting of a tutor (or don) and one or two students as practiced in the 18th and 19th century English university system provided very minimal, (if any) diversity of perspectives that Mill deems necessary for intellectual, social and moral development. Arguably, he would agree with critics, a century later, who considered (and still consider) the traditional Oxford tutorial system to be elitist and outdated in the era of more inclusive public universities. Notwithstanding its tarnished reputation, with modifications the tutorial can provide an effective tool for encouraging critical analysis and independent thought that

²⁷ *Inaugural Address*, pp. 13-14.

²⁸ Without having had the benefit of Jowett’s translation, Mill had read Plato’s dialogues and developed an affinity for the Socratic method, which he considered “unsurpassed as discipline for correcting errors, and clearing up the confusions incident to the *intellectus sibi permissus*. . .” As Mill later confessed: “The close, searching elenchus by which the man of vague generalities is constrained either to express his meaning to himself in definite terms, or to confess that he does not know what he is talking about; the perpetual testing of all general statements by particular instances. . . the dividing down to the thing sought—marking out its limits and definition by a series of accurately drawn distinctions between it and each of the cognate objects which are successively parted off from it—all this, as an education for precise thinking, is inestimable, and all this, even at that age (of twelve), took such hold of me that it became part of my own mind,” *Autobiography*, pp. 15-16.

Mill considered the cornerstone of education for civil political discourse. Attempting to put his ideas (and ideals) into practice, I have experimented with a variation of a tutorial method in my political theory seminars. Specifically, I use a tutorial format to have students engage one another in discussions on essay prompts regarding, for example, *On Liberty* (among other primary texts), for the purpose of critically scrutinizing Mill's political philosophy. (I would like to think Mill would approve.) At the same time, I have found that using a Socratic-Millian tutorial method can highlight the limitations of Mill's philosophy of education and, more generally, his liberal politics.

Today, the typical university political theory seminar must accommodate far more students with a wider range of academic interests and cultural backgrounds than its exclusive and, not to mention, largely inefficient Oxford tutorial in Mill's time. But rather than this being a drawback, a diversity (and reasonable number) of students in a tutorial structured seminar can more closely approximate Mill's ideal of an education that exposures students to a 'variety, not uniformity' of opinions.²⁹ In addition, it can raise the level of students' active and thoughtful reflection on the assigned primary texts and writing assignments. Thus, it can mitigate what Mill contemptuously called "the education of cram." Instead of being presented "with mere facts, and with the opinions or phrases of other people," students are prompted (and sometimes prodded) to develop their own judgements on the strengths and weaknesses of a political theory. Put simply, the tutorial method can provide for a very dynamic, lively exchange of ideas. Above all, I have found that a Socratic-Millian tutorial in political theory, if conducted under the right conditions, not only teaches students those 'arts and habits' Mill considers imperative for civil discourse on politics and ethics, but also provides them with insights into those questions and fundamental issues in which we share a common interest.

What, then, might a 21st century Socratic-tutorial method for teaching political theory and, especially, realizing John Stuart Mill's ideal of democratic discourse entail? How might a tutorial-type theory seminar be designed that will promote the above 'mental

²⁹ Offering both graduate and undergraduate political theory courses, I have taught "seminars" with as few as 2 students and as many as 25 students. However, my best tutorial-type seminars typically have between 12-18 students.

arts and habits' for carrying on thoughtful political dialogue, and insure fundamental values will be on-going concern for students? While these questions have guided much of what I do in teaching political theory, my use of the tutorial method continues to evolve, in part, due to changes in students' expectations, new technologies, and in my own outlook as a teacher. Nevertheless, I have adopted some tactics for creating what I believe are the conditions necessary for an effective Socratic tutorial-type seminar on political theory that, hopefully, will achieve what Mill considered essential educational 'outcomes':

(1) *Developing the habit of careful reading and attention to detail*: "Nothing is read slowly, or twice over," J.S. Mill found. "Books are run through with no less rapidity, and scarcely leave a more durable impression, than a newspaper article,"³⁰—or, currently, a website or a blog. With advances in technology students have access to far more books and articles than Mill could have imagined, but the habit of cursory reading he identified a century ago has also become more widespread. University students are accustomed to reading rapidly (and rapaciously) whatever instantly appears on their smart phones or laptops and, often, the result is, as Mill feared, "attention cannot sustain itself on any serious subject, even for the space of a review-article."³¹ However a successful seminar in political theory, especially one adopting a Socratic-tutorial method, requires that the student must first study independently by closely reading primary works, such as Mill's *On Liberty*, which can be challenging.³² To set the table, so-to-speak, for meaningful discussion, students must come to the 'tutorial' session having first wrestled with the key points of a writer's arguments as well as the insights that have been fleshed out through previous class discussions. To encourage the habit of reading, as Jefferson put it, "with care, pleasure, and improvement," I have each student orally present a series of short analytical essays on the readings and, in doing so, assume the role of a 'tutor.' In presenting and discussing her essay, the student discovers, (as Mill did from tutoring his

³⁰ *Civilization*, p. 211.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³² Quite rightly J.S. Mill thought it was important that students read original texts, (ideally in the author's language) and let student form their own judgements. Secondary texts merely "teach us some modern writer's notion of ancient thought," *Inaugural Address*, p. 26.

siblings,) “the great advantage of learning more thoroughly and retaining more lastingly” the books which she was assigned to discuss and ‘teach’ by discussing, for instance, J.S. Mill’s notion of individuality. In this way, a tutorial-style seminar motivates students to be regularly prepared to engage their classmates and the ‘lead’ tutor on an author’s arguments. Paying respects to Mill’s view that an understanding of ethics and politics can only develop from considering competing opinions, the aim of this tutorial method is that students will learn to read with care and attention, while learning not just from the professor as ‘tutor’— but from each other.

(2) *Developing the habit of recognizing nuance in the use of language in political theory; and the art of dissecting an argument and identifying where the fallacy lay:* Besides elevating the importance of clarity in written and oral expression, the Socratic-tutorial discussion can bring to light the ways in which political thinkers use and, frequently, abuse language. A thinker’s notion of ‘freedom’ or justice, etc., will be, as Mill observes, “far more deeply impressed on the mind” if we also hear it argued pro and con by “those who make the effort to understand it.” In making that effort toward understanding, students are asked to consider what exactly thinkers, and especially J.S. Mill, mean by ‘freedom.’ Is freedom treated as *a* good, or *the* good? Is the political thinker viewing freedom as a *means* for achieving other values (e.g. pleasure, individuality, equality, security, or a ‘true’ self), or as an *end*, a value good for its own sake, but not necessarily the only good or value? Regarding Mill’s *On Liberty*, students further consider whether, and to what extent, they agree with the statement that ‘J.S. Mill is not altogether clear about *why* he wants people to be free, and is simply confused about what freedom is.’ Addressing this prompt, students must pay close attention to Mill’s assumptions and logic, as they ultimately aim to determine how persuasive (and relevant) is his argument, and why some (who they may or not agree with) find Mill’s conception of freedom (like his concept of individuality) void of content or substance. Is it a freedom to develop the individual personality according to any “inward impulses,” (a truly frightening prospect), or a freedom to develop as a “progressive being”—implying a limited concept of individual freedom? Discussing these questions and essay responses has (much to my delight) provoked students to look up a classmate’s quote from Mill’s

work to critically examine its full context, and to debate its meaning (sometimes for an entire class). In addition, students not only reference Mill's writings, but also are encouraged to draw on what they have learned from studying history, sociology, psychology, and literature with the hope they will draw connections between these various ways of understanding human beings and social institutions.

(3) *Developing the art of expressing oneself clearly*: Early on, Mill found the best way to master any subject—philosophy, history, political economy, logic or mathematics—was to write a ‘treatise’ on it; once again, I have found having students write brief essays, typically three-four pages in length, encourages them not only to provide a close reading of the texts, but also to partake in political theorizing by offering their own interpretive analysis.³³ Writing a series short essays, students are challenged to set out a clear, thoughtful exegesis, to never use a word without meaning, or a word which adds nothing to their thesis. The student must know what she wants to say, and, as Mill advises, “say it with the highest degree of exactness and completeness, and bring it home to the mind with the greatest possible clearness and vividness.”³⁴ Listening to one another’s essays read aloud in class helps students distinguish a well-written, concise ‘mini-treatise’ from the confusing, ‘prolix’ counterpart. During these tutorial sessions, students work together as a group, critically examining their essays with the intention of developing, as Mill puts it, the art of “expressing a thought so perfectly in a few words or sentences,” that one does not need to add any more.

(4) *Developing, the habit of raising thought-provoking questions and the art of entering into another person’s thoughts*: J. S. Mill was convinced that social progress requires a continually questioning of ourselves and those around us ‘to avoid the deep slumber of a decided opinion.’ Questioning the basis of a political thinker’s convictions, his account of human nature, the evidence (or lack of) in support of his conclusions, the meaning and importance of his use of words, like justice and freedom, and so forth—is, indeed, central to Mill’s vision of a university as a place of free speculation. We

³³ In my political theory seminar-tutorial, students are required to distribute copies of their essays to their classmates. This way their classmates have time to read and compose questions before the essays are orally presented and discussed in class.

³⁴ *Inaugural Address*, p. 35.

understand any subject (including Mill's political and social philosophy) primarily by the questions we ask. This is especially true of the questions raised by political philosophers, e.g. 'how do we determine the nature and limits of power which can be exercised by society over the individual?'; 'What distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate authority?' In facilitating an elenchus-style discussion of these topics, I have students compose questions for each of the analytical essays distributed by their classmates prior to an oral defense. In this way, students can develop the skill of framing questions, orally and written, that will succinctly identify where ambiguity and limitations appear in general statements and definitions, and will accurately draw attention to basic suppositions of a political thinker and, ultimately, determine to whether, or to what degree, a theory or an argument makes sense. Most of all, students learn that, as Mill taught, posing questions allows us to enter another's thoughts and, thereby gain an understanding of those whose diagnosis of the human predicament may differ (considerably) from our own, which, in turn, can make us aware of the strong and weak grounds of our 'prescriptions.'

(5) *Developing the habit of submitting to refutation, and the art of assuming a new intellectual position:* Raising questions and providing criticisms during our tutorial helps sharpen the student essay writer's knowledge of the primary texts, and provides the necessary feedback for the student to gage his or her progress. Students, and especially undergraduates, find the oral defense of their essays can be the most intimidating aspect of a Socratic tutorial. The close, searching elenchus by which the student expressing muddy generalities must clarify her meaning to the professor and her classmates in definite terms, or to confess that she does not know what she was talking about can be, no doubt, intimidating. And it is. It requires mental and moral courage, a willingness—once again, in the words of Mill, "to justify our most familiar and intimate convictions" and be open to refutation of them. Although this can be challenging in times of sharp political divisions, I find, for the most part, students are receptive to critical refutation of their analysis and assessment of a political argument when the focus is on logic, or assumptions, or the apparent tensions between values. We have, in other words, a kind of political tutorial 'workshop' where together, professor and students, examine each other's evidence, soundness of our reasoning, and the gaps in our knowledge. Our questions and

refutations not only provide the essayist with feedback from the tutors, who are *both* professor and fellow students, but also help to steer the class discussion towards topics and concepts, (e.g. Mill's notions of eccentricity and genius) that students are having difficulty with or may not have sufficiently considered. In this way, the political theory tutorial creates an opportunity for students to develop—if not a 'new' intellectual outlook, a greater appreciation of the use of evidence, logic, and the standards by which we may judge political and social values, including their own.

By adopting the above Socratic tutorial method, I have attempted—admittedly, at times, more successfully with some classes than others—to engage students in a conversation on what Mill believed to be “the greatest interests of mankind as moral and social beings—ethics and politics,” and to appreciate “the failures of the human intellect as well as its successes. . . to be aware of the open questions, as well as those which have been definitively resolved.”³⁵ A tutorial in the spirit of Mill's free exchange of ideas presumes a 'civility' rooted in curiosity and openness to understanding opposing political views, not for the sake of demolishing them, but to make us aware of our own and others' fallibility. It requires listening carefully, a willingness to alter, or abandon our position based on new evidence, and forsake old platitudes for clear thinking. And lastly, if used within reason, a tutorial method can enable students to appreciate political theory as a creative, open ended series of challenges by considering fundamental questions; for example: What makes political theory 'political?' Or should we concern ourselves with establishing standards of human conduct? Discussing these questions, students learn not just what canonical thinkers had to say about them, but they can engage one another in answering these questions for themselves. “Whatever philosophical opinions the study of these question may lead us to adopt, no one ever came out of the discussed of them without increased vigour of understanding, and increased demand for precision of thought and language, and a more careful and exact appreciation of the nature of proof.”³⁶ And yet, is Mill expecting too much from us and our capacity (and desire) in holding our respective political and moral views open to debate? Is he underestimating the challenges

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 65

of teaching people how to overcome their cognitive biases and faulty heuristics? Perhaps, if we are ever to achieve Mill's 'emancipatory vision' of education for democracy and freedom, then we must begin by recognizing the limitations of his theory civil discourse and of the tutorial method itself.

III. Limitations of Mill's Philosophy of Education

J.S. Mill never doubted the power of a good education in cultivating individuality and critical thinking, engaged and tolerant citizens, which, ultimately, would result in a progressive society. After all, he was schooled in his father's utilitarian's faith in the sciences, and an advocate of educational reform. Contrary to earlier schools of thought, Mill did not adopt a strict 'environmentalist' view of education where the tutor is all-important and the pupil a mere receptacle of the subject taught. While he borrowed from his father's model of a liberal arts education, Mill did not wholly embrace James Mill's belief that one's earliest impressions are the deepest and, thus, prejudices and habits are hard baked into the adult mind. He acknowledges that principles should guide one's life, but they must not become merely "habit" and override one's duty to examine their consequences. Ideally, a higher education cultivates the analytical skills for life-long learning and thoughtful reflection on the principles and rules we live by. In many respects, Mill wants we all want to achieve in teaching adult learners: vigorous debate, but with open mindedness and skepticism, an 'unbiased' scrutiny of commonly held political views based on evidence. Nevertheless, Mill's philosophy of education and civil discourse throws the tensions in his liberal values between individuality and a shared common good into sharp relief, as well as raises certain thorny issues in airing a wide variety of opinions, which those who teach politics and government continue to confront.

Consider, for example, the challenges of 'operationalizing' his call for *vigorous* and *open-minded* intellectual discussion in the classroom. He wants vigorous arguments, which means being confronted with moral and intellectual opposition. Without vigorous arguments, which may be uncomfortable for both parties, the opinion or judgement on each side "will be held in the matter of prejudice" rather than as a living truth. If we are

not open to considering the other side, then we preclude the possibility of determining what ‘portion’ of an argument is true or false. On this point, Mill is adamant that “. . .the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole subject is by hearing what can be said about it from persons of *every variety of opinion*, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by *every character of mind*.”³⁷ Still, maintaining both vigorous and open-minded debate in the classroom from ‘every character of mind,’ can pose serious challenges, especially on the subjects of politics and ethics, that Mill seems to never adequately address; namely, how much leeway would he give for the ‘character of mind’ of those who adhere to racist or sexist opinions in a seminar? Surely, to consider such racism and sexist ideas merely abstractly without pointing out the harm such ideas have caused can lead to permitting bigotry to draw near without being on guard against its bite. In other words, there are occasions when the teacher is not necessarily assuming infallibility in calling out wrong-headedness, unethical, and illogical arguments. Rather, to remain silent, assured and seemingly indifferent in the presence of offensive, baseless remarks risks relinquishing the discussion to the most vocal, ideologically strident individuals in a seminar.

His overgenerous view of human rationality and good will raises another related weakness in Mill’s liberal philosophy of education (one, perhaps, we still grapple with). Underlying his calls for freedom of thought and admiration of experimental practices in the sciences is an over-valuation of intellectual activities as such, and an underrating of the emotional and feeling sides of life. Too often in the effort to achieve clarity by a purely intellectual judgement on the basis of facts, we tend to overlook or disregard one of the most important aspects of any social situation, and especially in discussing politics and social issues; namely, that it can arouse certain feelings, sentiments, and emotions, which inherently belong to that situation at the moment. A student with emotionally strong political opinions can passionately defend her position, which, on one level, Mill wants her to do. On the other hand, strong emotional and disputative interactions even the ‘safe’ academic setting can override her intellectual curiosity in considering the flaws in her argument or examining opposing point the of view. Granted, Mill recognizes the

³⁷ Italics added, *On Liberty*, p. 25.

power of emotions over reason in the heat of debate, which can become exacerbated when an opinion or idea is “many people’s liking instead of one.” But like many liberals, he appears to be a ‘tightrope walker in the wind’ when it comes to the display of strong emotions, which often accompany discussions of fundamentals.³⁸ This may explain why—his harm principle notwithstanding, Mill provides few, if any, signposts for recognizing when vigorous, emotional debate crosses over into social pressure, let alone what actions can remedy the situation. The answer, however, is not the complete control of the tutorial environment for the sake of steering conversations away from emotionally charged subjects. Political ideas, after all, have a direct bearing on what we, individually and socially, consider essential to living a good life, and the ways in which we pursue our goals. Our challenge, therefore, as teachers, is balancing vigorous intellectual dialogue and emotional responses, by which we learn—not to ignore angry outburst or tears, but how to utilize these emotions and control them for the most effective teaching.

Without undermining a free-flowing Socratic-tutorial, there are a few strategies for maintaining vigorous, emotionally passionate, and open-minded discussion.³⁹ As noted before, I have found it useful to structure class discussions around a political theorist’s ideas with the use of essay prompts (which students select) based on secondary interpretations and, admittedly, questions that interest me and, hopefully, my students. The prompts allow us to consider the value of thinker’s ideas in a contemporary context as well. Students consider, to cite another example, if ‘J.S. Mill’s case for individual liberty is merely a plea for eccentricity, and, if so, it is ‘eccentricity of a very predictable kind.’ This prompt has provoked some lively class exchanges regarding the notion of *eccentricity*, including its analytical and normative value in defending individual liberty and its purpose in society. Frequently, students come away from these discussions with more questions than answers, which some of them find frustrating. As one exasperated

³⁸ With the 20th century rise of fascism, Lewis Mumford warned his readers that “intellectual judgement, eviscerated of all emotional references and labeled ‘realistic,’ is the prime source of the pragmatic liberal’s errors in dealing with the conduct of his fellow men. In his very effort to become impartial, he exercises a curiously perverted kind of partiality—that of renouncing a large part of the human personality. This gives him a feeling of godlike unruffledness at the very moment he is making an ass of himself;” see his *Faith for Living*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940, pp. 110-111.

³⁹ No one tactic works best for all conversational situations, but a sense of humor sometimes helps when the emotional tap is overflowing.

student inquired, “does John Mill expect us to just endlessly debate these things?” “When does this debate end, and we just get on with living our lives?”

Many commentators have expressed similar sentiments (albeit in sophisticated exegesis form) and have concluded that Mill’s argument for freedom of thought in education, like his defense of individual liberty, is merely a defense of skepticism and endless disputation void of substance or conclusion. He wants us to listen to all sides of an argument, while questioning all assumptions and claims. Critics fear (and my students complain) that Mill, once again, asks too much of us, he wants us to question every claim, assumption, custom, rule, or truth, all the time. Certainly, it seems he wants us to accept nothing as proven until we have can establish it for ourselves as ‘true.’ Does this mean, a student asked, “we be critical critics 24/7?” If so, this would be emotionally and intellectually exhausting, not to mention hard on our social relationships, if we had to keep all of our cherished principles under constant scrutiny. Indeed, Mill’s antipathy towards dogma and habitually accepting popular ideas and theories would have us question all well-worn and accepted principles or truths, but requiring we have this much skepticism would deprive us of that capacity for energetic reform which Mill prizes so highly.⁴⁰ We could not adopt a social belief, much less act on it, without being wholly certain of its truth or validity. Certainly, it would have helped if Mill had drawn a distinguish between a *prima facie acceptance* and a *prima facie rejection* of a social belief, a principle or custom, though both leave room for skepticism. Without asking for blind submission, a *prima facie acceptance* asks us to regard a political or social belief, or custom, or convention as our guide, at least until we have reason to think it false, whereas (Mill’s) *prima facie rejection* leaves us no sure ground on which to base judgement or action. On the other hand, there is always the danger, as Mill reminds us, that ‘habit of acceptance’ will override the need for skepticism and critical inquiry at the very moment we need to think differently or do things differently. Indeed, this distinction

⁴⁰ Having been taught to “find out everything for himself,” Mill admitted that his own education “was much more fitted for training me to *know* than to *do*,” see Mill’s *Autobiography*, p. 25 As one critic points out, “we often find that people who appreciate every side of a question (or argument) find it hard to come to a conclusion;” see William Thomas, “Mill,” *Great Political Thinkers*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992: pp, 239-360, p. 333.

between prima facie acceptance and prima facie rejection can help students understand that there are different forms of skepticism, and these trade-offs when embracing one form over another. In the end, social and political circumstances require us to modify in some measure the universality of Mill's reasoning. We may never confidently know when or regarding what issue(s) a prima facie rejection is necessary, but it is, arguably, highly desirable in a political theory tutorial-setting for developing judgement, analytical skills and clear thinking.

Lastly, Mill's theory of education for civil discourse throws in sharp relief for students the tensions between individuality, happiness, *and* the cultivation of character. He had come to see in the qualities of character a value which could not be satisfactorily grouped under the general idea of happiness, try as he may. Unless we adopt a strict Benthamite utilitarianism, we may well agree that, (even in pursuing a higher education), happiness is not the only value, and the development of the individual's character is of greater importance. But it does not help to gloss over the conflict of values, as Mill does, in making the happiness, individualism, and education for civil discourse dependent on the 'qualities of character,' and visa-versa. Having students consider Mill's controversial notion of character (or characterless) development and its ambiguities, therefore, can make them aware of their own political leanings and value hierarchies. As typically a liberal response (ironically), some students fear any 'standard' for the qualities of character will be inherently exclusive, and chafe at what they see as a marginalization of certain 'forms of character' based on non-western cultural, gender and ethnic identities, which do not conform to Mill's ideal of an educated 'civilized' human being. Other students (also with liberal leanings) deny that he is privileging any particular 'ideal' character traits because this would be odds with his robust defense of individual liberty.⁴¹ This, in turn, opens Mill to criticisms from others (with conservative leanings) that his idea of character development is void of substance; consequently, he does not provide any 'measures' by which to gage one's progress towards character development other

⁴¹ Similarly, Donner concludes that Mill's argument for 'self-development and cultivation of character "operates at a high level of abstraction to avoid the appearance of promoting any specific character type," p. 267.

than vague references to “the virtue of eccentricity.”⁴² Simply any departure, however idiosyncratic, from a widely accepted principle or political view is itself beneficial for what he vaguely calls ‘character development.’ We do not, of course, resolve these debates in our tutorial sessions, nor do we necessarily arrive at final conclusions as to the ‘qualities of character’ consistent with individuality and living in a democratic polity. But then again, Mill hoped these issues, such as the relationship between individual liberty and character development, would generate continuous conversation into foreseeable future and, if my experiment in using the tutorial method is any indication, he appears to have succeeded.

Conclusion

Finally, J.S. Mill did not think that the “truth” was whatever gives human beings comfort in their beliefs, any more than he thought the “good” was whatever gave them pleasure. In contrast to his father’s generation of utilitarians, for J.S. Mill that which gives us pleasure is *the habit of striving* for the good or the pursuit of truth. It is, in other words, the difference between a moral standard entirely dependent on our individual and/or group desires, a hedonistic ethic, and one that recognizes our responsibility for following external ethical standards. In some sense, Mill presupposes an objective ethical standard, but where he departs from other moralists who posit a higher moral truth, independent of human whims, is that he (like other liberal theorists) is more interested in *how* we go about attaining truth than its actual content. Paradoxically for Mill, therefore, we are never so close to the ultimate moral good or truth as when we realize how much further human development has yet to go. We are never so far away from the ultimate good or truth as when we think humanity has acquired it. It is the reaching for truth, not the having reached it, that Mill seems to value most—a value, surely, we wish to impart to our students as well.

⁴² Also, R.P. Anschutz found Mill substitutes “one error for another—bohemian nonsense for bourgeois nonsense.”, *The Philosophy of J.S. Mill*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953, p. 25.

Although his liberal idealism perhaps overvalues the role of discussion in eliciting truth, J.S. Mill did not think that political or social “truths” will be useless once established because this would end debate. Nor did he fear, as one critic claims, that human beings may one day run out of moral and political issues for discussion just as he had worried (during his emotional breakdown) that “they would one day run out of musical tunes.”⁴³ Mill recognized not only that individuals’ goals in life are diverse, their experience are varied, but also their political opinions are subject to change as they gain new insights. Like Mill, most of us who teach the subject of politics and philosophy want to start conversations, e.g. on the relationship between majority rule and minority rights, the role of civil disobedience, the meaning of liberty and the public good—and to keep these conversations going. What he could not have anticipated was the power of social media and the internet in hardening political views and, by walling-off individuals into like-minded networks, having the effect of curtailing sustained, meaningful dialogue. I find that students are very aware of the current political tribalism and, (in an act of rebelling against this ‘new’ status quo?), are amenable to having meaningful and lively tutorial discussion on fundamentals issues, which political thinkers have addressed with varying degrees of success. Together we realize that in our beliefs we are divided, but in our doubts, we are united; thus, in the classroom, at least, knowledge-seeking and truth-seeking about politics and ethics is still alive and vigorous.

⁴³ See Thomas, p. 335.

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