

On the Necessity of Erroneous Opinions to the Vitality of Knowledge:

A Response to John Stuart Mill

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Abstract

John Stuart Mill raised the question of whether knowledge loses its truth, its value, and its vitality whenever it is no longer discussed or disputed. He vacillated between various solutions, never providing a definitive claim one way or the other. However, I affirm that erroneous opinion is necessary to the vitality of knowledge. I present both a magnitude and a breadth argument, claiming that disputing and defending an opinion has the respective effects of augmenting the idea itself and of forcing a larger portion of society to be intellectually adept; I also present examples in defense of these claims. The logical consequence of this conclusion is that the intellectual apex of society occurs when truth is least agreed upon, rather than when, as intuition would have us believe, all truths are commonly assented to. We are smartest, collectively, when truth is most disputed.

On Liberty

In his 1859 work *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill presented the possibility that error and dispute might be a necessary condition of developing an intimate understanding of ideas and of beliefs.¹ He asks if truth ceases to be potent when said truth is generally accepted by all, and whether it is necessary that a portion of society always err in order for the other portions to fully comprehend their beliefs. The most potent iteration of this question is as follows: “As soon as mankind have unanimously accepted a truth, does the truth perish within them?”² He poses the same general concept in varying ways a few more times before offering his thoughts in response.

It’s necessary to preface by mentioning that, generally, *On Liberty* reads more like an inquiry than an argument; throughout the text, Mill focuses more on raising questions and exploring answers rather than trying to prove certain claims. In a similar fashion, he did not definitively respond one way or the other to the question aforementioned.³ Instead, he offers a variety of thoughts and of opinions in response to it. He begins by noting that a tendency towards unanimity of opinion is an “inevitable and indispensable” characteristic of societal improvement. That said, Mill is not ignorant of the benefits provided by discussion of thought. He agrees that the vitality of opinions is strengthened through discussion and dispute. Because of this awareness, Mill suggests that contrivances be developed to support the discussion of opinions. He mentions that the Socratic dialectics from Plato’s dialogues and the Dialectic component of

¹ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1859), 41-42. Mill notes that this idea originally occurred in Arthur Helps’s 1835 work *Thoughts in the Cloister and the Crowd*, as the aphorism “the deep slumber of a decided opinion.”

² *Ibid.*, 41.

³ *Ibid.*, 42.

the medieval Trivium are two notable examples.⁴ In the latter case (i.e. in the case of a contrivance which individuals could experientially involve themselves in), Mill observes that such contrived discussions are not nearly as valuable as genuine discussions due to the fact that they stem from authority rather than from reason. That is, because students are required to engage by teachers rather than by conviction, the discussions are not as effective. Mill also suggests the possibility of our own reflective critical analysis, which would enable us to assess our opinions individually without the need for a dialectic partner. He concludes by simply stating that we should be grateful for anyone who disagrees with us because they strengthen the vitality of our opinions by forcing us to defend them in discussion.

Defenses

My first defense focuses on the value of an idea when it has been defended against an interlocutor. My claim is simple: the act of earnestly discussing a belief in an attempt to convince someone else augments an idea beyond its state as an internal belief. In cognitive psychology, this augmentation is referred to as elaboration and involves connecting pre-existing schemas in new ways.⁵ Such elaboration and augmentation can be observed with how we learn in the first place; ideas become unpacked the more we discuss them. We start with general concepts or static facts, and the more we engage with them, the more life that they acquire. Now let us suppose you study a book intensely, but never discuss its contents. You never write about them, you never speak about them, and you certainly never defend them. Can it be said that you *know* that concept to its fullest extent? Would you learn something new (i.e. would your understanding be

⁴ For an introduction to the latter concept, I recommend Dorothy Sayers's *The Lost Tools of Learning*.

⁵ Anita Woolfolk Hoy, *Educational Psychology*, (Boston: Pearson, 2016), 312.

augmented) by engaging with it in any of the previously mentioned manners? Is it not true that you learn something unique through reflection and something else entirely through discussion? Through a combination of the two, you arrive at a deeply intimate relationship with the idea. A new, more meaningful conception is developed – a conception which one could not achieve without reflection *or* discussion. Both are necessary to arrive at the fullest understanding of a topic. Beyond that, authentic belief is also necessary, else the effectuated understanding will always be less developed than the potential understanding. Someone who ardently believes in their idea will engage with it more intimately, more earnestly, and more intensely than will someone who does so to please an authority or even to develop one's own intellect. Contrivances can never compensate for genuine discussions. Mill acknowledged this, but for some reason he did not believe it to be sufficient reasoning to affirm the necessity of error.⁶ I do.

The second defense I offer is one which involves the quantity of people with a strong intellect. There is a general tendency throughout history for humans to desire that which makes their life easier, a trend which I shall refer to as humanity's tendency toward ease of existence. This is evidenced by our continual creation of new technologies, devices which by their very definition are intended to make existence easier. Agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation are all relevant industries with critically valuable technologies that enable our current standard of living. In and of itself, humanity's tendency toward ease of existence is not a negative trait; it is useful for survival and enables artistic pursuits and general comfort. However, when applied to the context of a society which does not have to discuss the validity of its received opinions, it seems rational to conclude that the majority of humanity will tend to choose not to partake in

⁶ John Stuart Mill. *On Liberty*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1859), 42-43.

Mill's suggested contrivances. Thus, even if such contrivances can be said to provide the same degree of strength in vitality of opinion, they cannot be said to be easily and effectively applied to anywhere near the same extent. It is hard to escape discussing an idea when someone disagrees with your holding it; it is significantly easier to escape discussing an idea when the relevant discussion is ultimately fabricated. In a sense, Mill notes this critique as well, though he does not apply it to the contrivances. He states that "until people are again systematically trained to [use negative criticism], there will be few great thinkers and a low general average of intellect in any but the mathematical and physical departments of speculation."⁷ However, he again does not see this as sufficient evidence for the truth of his question.

It seems reasonable to conclude then that something is in fact lost when society ceases to disagree upon ideas. It is an indispensable characteristic of total truth that it be defended before it can be intimately understood. Furthermore, there will always remain a portion of it that is not felt nor understood so long as the truth value of the proposition is not debated, and even critical reflection and contrived discussions cannot suffice to compensate for the loss of understanding that accompanies general acceptance.

Intellectual Pinnacle of Society

These defenses lead me to my main point: that society is at its most intelligent prior to the point at which all truths are accepted. Not only is error a prerequisite of truth, but it is also a necessary trait for intellectual capability. Minds that never have to contemplate or to defend their opinions are empty and idle minds – minds which can hardly even be said to be minds. Thus, rather than the natural intuition that proving claims empirically makes us, as a society, more

⁷ Ibid., 43.

intelligent, it would seem that a lack of necessity in defending our beliefs serves only to make us cognitively slower and less intelligent. Our intellectual apex occurs not when everything has been discovered, but when everything is yet to be discovered.

Imagine, if you will, the last time you were correct in a thoroughly contentious argument.⁸ In the process of discussing your belief, did you learn anything new? If nothing revelatory occurred, then did you become more familiar with the topic? Did you identify new angles to approach it from? Did you learn how to formulate it such that it is received better by varying consciousnesses? For me, the concept of determinism comes to mind. I defended determinism against my best friend's critiques, and while he offered new points that I hadn't considered, the conversation also made me more familiar with the ins and outs of my concept. Beyond that, it sparked connections between determinism and other concepts. Consequently, I learned more about the idea by relating it to other systems of thought, in new and varying ways. It would have taken me years to contemplate determinism sufficiently such that I could come to the same critiques that my friend's unique perspective offered, and even then, I do not believe I could have ever learned all of the things I learned had he not truly been in disagreement with me. This is an example of the augmentation defense.

An iteration of the breadth defense can be found by examining how society tends to make use of the internet. It's hard to deny that the internet can wield immense instructional value. It is now easier than ever to develop a new skill, to hone a new craft, or to learn a new concept. However, most of modern first world society uses the internet solely for entertainment purposes. The social benefit is not to be undervalued. It is no small gain for humanity that we are more

⁸ The case of believing something false and it being proven wrong need not be considered as we are concerned primarily with the augmentation of true beliefs.

connected than ever, and perhaps there is moral value to the good of social interaction; however, an increase in one good (e.g. social interaction) necessarily detracts from investment in other goods (e.g. intellectual development), and the fact remains that society's intellectual development is at a loss in this instance.

Conclusion

The two defenses I offered to Mill's inquiry are not radical, nor is it likely that they were unknown to him. Indeed, he seems to acknowledge each briefly at varying points in his discussion. I do not know why he did not discuss them at greater length or believe them to be worthy evidence to support the claim that erroneous opinions are necessary for true vitality of knowledge. Perhaps it was because he and I possess varying conceptions of intelligence, or perhaps he truly just did not believe the defenses to be significant, even if he and I understand them in the same way. However, I do believe the defenses offered and their accompanying examples are sufficient to prove that opinions are less full and less known when not defended, that contrived discussions can never parallel genuine discussions, and that most citizens will not willingly develop their ideas in great length due to humanity's tendency toward ease of existence. More importantly, I believe that the fulfillment of all truths in society will result in a depressingly low general average of intellect. To the last point I offer no solutions, and I only hope that someone else might instead.