

The Utility of Dissent

In *On Liberty*, Mill defends the claim that dissent as dissent promotes the ultimate aim of morality, which is long-term, overall utility. The moral merit of a dissenting view does not depend, says Mill, either on the extent to which that view is true or on any desire of the proponent of that view to maximize utility. Rather, dissent promotes utility, and thus has moral merit, primarily by opposing the dominant outlook. Many of the challenges raised against Mill's position focus on truth and falsity, doubts about the progressiveness of humanity, and the harm that opinions can do to others. I shall focus on two somewhat less frequently discussed, interrelated objections concerning a dissenter's civility of expression. The first is that only dissent that is coherent and relevant to human concerns promotes utility. The second is that only dissent that is moderately expressed promotes utility. Incoherent views or immoderately articulated views, while they sometimes may not hinder utility, do not promote it. So the argument goes.

Despite Mill's seeming acknowledgement of these challenges to his position, the challenges, I argue, are at least partly misdirected. A key role of dissent is to challenge received opinion, not necessarily to offer substantial, viable alternatives to it. Moreover, to claim that a particular view lies outside the realms of intelligibility and human interest is to assume the infallibility of one's own perspective, something Mill warns against. Furthermore, although moderately expressed views are usually preferable to immoderately expressed views, sometimes the only way to get publicity for a view is to allow or even to invite society to ridicule and sensationalise it as intemperate. In this paper, I seek to vindicate Mill's defence of dissent while acknowledging potential pitfalls.

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