

Liberalism and Politics: Reading Mill as a 'Political' Theorist

Mill has been accused by contemporary political theorists of being a 'comprehensive' liberal: of defending liberal institutions through appeal to convictions about what the good life consists in. Many contemporary 'political' liberals argue that attempts to consider how society should be run that consider such substantive questions will lead to intolerance of diversity. To deal with this dilemma they reduce their substantive claims and emphasize agreement and procedural solutions. They call this making their theories more political. In my paper I will argue that Mill's liberalism is able to accommodate pluralism, and use his work to suggest that the contemporary 'political' liberals have an inadequate conception of what it means to call a theory political. Although Mill did believe that politics must address substantive normative questions, he accepted that there was disagreement. Any answer was fallible and likely to be only part of the truth. He argued that the best way of improving our answers was by engaging with, and attempting to understand a broad range of alternative views. Thus Mill positively encouraged diversity and experimentation. Furthermore, the important place given by Mill to persuasive political argument reveals the bizarreness of calling contemporary liberal theories political. Mill believed that politics was marked by disagreement because the questions addressed were important and developing a well-rounded view of political questions required understanding and experience. Thus, unlike contemporary political theorists, he did not think that the practices of politics, of argument and disagreement, could be replaced by a supra-political fair procedure or impartial reason.

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