

**ARGUMENT IN MIXED COMPANY:
MOM'S MAXIM VS. MILL'S PRINCIPLE**
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It is impolite to discuss matters of religion or politics in mixed company. So goes the popular adage which all of us were supposed to have learned as children from our mothers. Let's call it *Mom's Maxim*. We tend to accept Mom's Maxim. But is it philosophically sound? In this short essay, we raise some objections to Mom's Maxim and make a case for an alternative which we call *Mill's Principle*.

Giving Mom Her Due

Mom's Maxim enjoins us to avoid being impolite, especially in our dealings with strangers. And that certainly is sound advice. Impoliteness consists of acting in ways which make others needlessly uncomfortable or ill at ease. We are to steer clear of discussions of religion and politics, it seems, because discussion of them makes others uncomfortable. To be more precise, Mom's Maxim instructs us to avoid discussion of such topics in *mixed company*, that is, among those who, for all we know, may not agree with what we say. Presumably the idea is that people are likely to hold differing political and religious views, and disagreement over these topics makes them uncomfortable. Since we generally should avoid needlessly making others uncomfortable, those topics should be taken off the table.

Notice, however, that there is no prohibition against argument in general. There is no adage directing us to shun

discussion of other controversial matters in mixed company. People tend to hold differing views about sports, food, movies, music, and a whole lot else. Disagreements over these topics are often heated. Yet there is no corresponding rule against discussions of *these* topics. In fact, it seems that some matter of controversy on these topics may be exactly the kind of topic for polite dinner conversation. Why?

Here's a possible explanation. Not all disagreement is created equal. Some disagreements are such that we can *live with* them. You hold your view, you hold that those who disagree with you are mistaken, and you may even engage in lively debate with your opponents when the opportunity arises. But if at the end of the day your arguments fail to persuade, you lose no sleep over the fact that your opponents are mistaken. You can live with the fact that they're wrong, just as they can live with what they perceive as your error. No sweat.

To be clear, *no sweat* disagreements are *real* disagreements. When we elect to move on from an unresolved dispute, we are not saying that nobody's view is right or that everything is 'just a matter of opinion.' We may hold firm to the correctness of our view, while admitting that those who disagree are mistaken. It's not that we don't care about the matter in dispute. In taking such a stance, we are simply recognizing that certain questions are difficult to settle and that we must go on *despite* our disagreement. Sometimes we decide to move on from an unresolved disagreement precisely for the purpose of gathering more evidence or developing new arguments in favor of our views. Sometimes we simply move on, resolving never to revisit the issue.

Yet not all disagreements are of the *no sweat* variety. Sometimes we disagree about matters of such magnitude that we cannot simply let the dispute go unresolved. Let's call such disputes *momentous*. When disagreement is *momentous*, it concerns matters that loom large in the lives of the disputants. Again, the distinction between *no sweat*

and *momentous* disputes is not that the former concern things that don't really matter to us while the latter involve things that do. We rarely bother to argue about things that don't matter to us. Instead, the difference is that in *momentous* disagreements, what is in dispute is something that matters for how we live our lives. In *momentous* disagreements, we are disagreeing about matters that are significant to the rest of our lives.

Some beliefs are central to how we live our lives. We *invest* our lives in the truth of these beliefs, we *live by* them. Let's call these *core beliefs*. Changing a core belief would typically cause much of one's life to change. One would have to *live differently* from how one lived before. So there is an understandable tendency to seek to *preserve* the beliefs that most directly inform our lives. After all, it *matters* how we live. Consequently, it matters what our core beliefs say about how we should live.

Our beliefs about politics and religion – we could add here beliefs about many values – are commonly at the core of our lives. For example, when one's view about the artistic merits of Martin Scorsese's films changes, we say that one has merely changed one's mind. But when one's religious, moral, or political views change significantly, we employ stronger language to describe what has happened. For example, one doesn't merely *change one's mind* about whether Jesus was divine; one *converts* to Christianity. When one comes to believe that animals have moral standing which obliges us to not eat them, one does not simply *come to agree* with the vegetarians; one *becomes a vegetarian*. Consequently, when one challenges the core beliefs of others, one thereby calls into question not merely what they believe, but *who they are*.

In short, disagreements concerning core beliefs can be *personal*. Discussion of such personal matters is usually out of place among strangers, or even acquaintances. Hence discussion of core beliefs – such as beliefs about religion and politics – is inappropriate in mixed company. It seems that Mom is right, as usual.

Trouble for Mom: Mill's Principle

But there's something peculiar about Mom's Maxim. Recall that the reason we should avoid discussion of religion and politics in mixed company is that our beliefs about these topics are momentous. This is why disputes about them are often so *personal*. But this is also why it is important to try to believe *what's true* about these topics. We all want to live well, and this requires some degree of success in believing what's true about how we should live.

If we want the truth, we should want to talk with people with whom we disagree. We should want to examine the reasons they offer in support of their views; we should want to know, and even grapple with, the criticisms they have of ours. We should want to try to respond to those criticisms, and to develop our own criticisms of the opposing views. In other words, we should *care* about the truth of our religious, moral, and political beliefs. And caring about the truth of our beliefs requires us to *take seriously* the reasons, arguments, and criticisms of those who disagree. The British philosopher John Stuart Mill captured this thought well in his seminal work *On Liberty*; he said, 'He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that.' Call this *Mill's Principle*. It counsels us to argue in mixed company about momentous matters; it tells us to reject Mom's Maxim.

It is important to stress that taking seriously the arguments and criticisms of those with whom we disagree does not require us to adopt the attitude that our own beliefs might be false or in need of repair. Mill's Principle does not call for skepticism about our momentous beliefs. Neither does it advocate a wishy-washy relativism where objections, reasons, and arguments are treated as merely expressions of different 'points of view' with no critical edge. Rather, it says that we should take seriously those who disagree precisely because we care about the *truth* of our own beliefs. Those who follow Mom's Maxim always

and everywhere show an inappropriately low level of concern for their beliefs. Why?

You're probably familiar with the phenomenon known as *semantic saturation*. This is what happens when one repeats a word out loud over and over again. Eventually one loses one's sense of the *meaning* of the word one is uttering. The word's meaning fades away, and all one hears is the sound of the word, or rather the noise one makes in uttering it. Beliefs can be like this. When we grow accustomed to hearing only our own beliefs, we tend to lose sight of what they mean. They become slogans, catchphrases, dogmas, clichés, and mantras. We habitually recite them, but they eventually lose their meaning, we grow detached from them, they become mere *sounds*.

By bringing our beliefs into contrast with the beliefs of those with whom we disagree, we force ourselves to stay connected to our beliefs, we remind ourselves of where we stand. Perhaps more importantly, when we take seriously those who disagree, we bring into focus the reasons we have for our beliefs. And this in turn helps us to perceive more accurately the ways in which our beliefs are inter-related, how they hang together, and how they form a system of beliefs. We are thus better positioned to see new implications of our beliefs, new connections between what we already believe and new ideas that we have not yet considered. We learn; we integrate. We are also prompted to devise new reasons and arguments in support of our beliefs. Furthermore, we come to better understand the views of others and thus become better able to diagnose where they go wrong. Put simply, by engaging with those who disagree with us, we can gain a better *command* of our own beliefs, we come to *be in possession* of our beliefs. By engaging in disagreement with others, we come to *know* what we believe, so to speak. If we care about our beliefs, we should seek out intelligent opposition to them. We should discuss them in mixed company. Sorry, Mom.

Of course, there are risks that one incurs when adopting Mill's Principle. Sometimes when we take seriously those with whom we disagree, we discover that our reasons are not as compelling as we had thought. We may discover that there is more that can be said in support of the opposing views than we expected. We might be presented with ideas and objections we had never considered. We might find that some criticism that we had taken to be fatal to an opposing view is in fact easily defused. And we might discover that our beliefs are just false. In any of these cases, we will have to reconsider, reformulate, reevaluate, reconfigure, or revise our own views. As we have already mentioned, the experience of revising one's core beliefs can be disconcerting, frustrating, and even painful.

These risks are significant. But, like all assessments of risk, the matter must be considered comparatively, against the risks associated with alternative courses of action. We already have said that beliefs about religion, morality, and politics matter because they have a great impact on how we live our lives. How we live matters. This means that it's important to believe what's true about religion, morality, and politics. The stakes are high. Hence the risk of frustration, disappointment, and discomfort seems worth incurring, given the alternative.

In calling for discussion in mixed company about religious and political beliefs, Mill's Maxim does not press a case for what is variously called 'open-mindedness' or 'mutual understanding.' It does not call for a celebration of the diversity of beliefs. It does not claim that one owes it to others to learn about their perspectives. Of course, these may all be good things. Mill's Principle says that there is a *cognitive* requirement that calls us to engage with others about important matters. It claims that engaging in discussion about momentous topics in mixed company is necessary if we are to exhibit the proper care for the truth of our beliefs. In other words, violating Mom's Maxim is a demand of responsible believing.

The Dark Side: No Reasonable Opposition

It may be said in response that we have been too hard on Mom's Maxim. It is, one might say, a harmless principle of public decency, and not the call to cognitive irresponsibility we have described. We beg to differ. As we will now argue, Mom's Maxim has a positively dark side. It not only discourages responsible believing, but actually encourages irresponsibility with respect to belief.

We mentioned above some of the risks associated with taking seriously the views of those with whom we disagree. These risks provide a strong inclination to avoid debates in mixed company. Yet there's something so manifestly correct about the idea that responsible believing requires engagement with the opposition that we often feel compelled to say *something* about those who disagree with us. No one who is fully committed to his beliefs can avoid this. At the very least, one must hold that those who disagree are in some way *mistaken*. We are driven, in other words, towards taking account of opposing views, especially in the case of momentous beliefs. This is why so many would count among their religious beliefs their beliefs about *other* religions. Think of Catholics and Protestants. Each group has their own set of theological beliefs, but each group also has beliefs about the *other group's beliefs* as well. It is *part of each religion* to think that the other religion is in some way mistaken. This is even more obviously the case in politics. In the United States, popular political commentators tend to spend more time describing *their opposition* (mostly in highly negative ways) than affirming their positive views about policy. In the United States, part of what it is to be a Republican or a Democrat is to have a low opinion of the platform and members of the other party. When we take up momentous beliefs, we not only affirm some view about how we should live; we also adopt beliefs about others' beliefs.

It is important to get our beliefs about others' beliefs right. Yet there is a strong incentive to avoid the risks of

actually engaging with those with whom we disagree. One common way of trying to avoid the risks that follow from the demands of responsible believing is to try to convince ourselves that we've already met those demands. We tell ourselves that we've already engaged with those who disagree, and have overcome their objections. Most commonly, we tell ourselves that our opponents really have no objections anyway; we portray them to ourselves as benighted, ignorant, unintelligent, wicked, deluded, or worse.

This tactic dominates popular political commentary in the United States. On almost any issue, the pundit's principal argument in favor of his or her favored view is that the opposition is not simply *wrong*, but *ignorant*, *idiotic*, and *depraved*. A quick stroll through the Politics or Current Events section of any bookstore – or a cursory scan of political talk-radio and TV – will confirm this. To mention only a few examples, we are told by conservatives that that liberalism is a mental disorder which afflicts people who are brainless idiots. The liberal popular commentators portray conservatives as greedy liars, fools, and hypocrites who make only noise and oppose science. The key to popular politics, it seems, is to hold one's opponents in contempt.

This strategy represents one simple and effective way of seeming to satisfy the demands of responsible believing while avoiding the risks of engagement. Let's call it the *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy. It runs as follows: You tell yourself, or surround yourself with people who tell you, that there is *no reasonable opponent* to your views, that all opposition is woefully uninformed, ignorant, or irrational. If there is no reasonable opposition to what you believe, then there's no point in trying to argue with those who disagree with you. Indeed, those who disagree with you are not even worth speaking to; the fact that they disagree shows that they're stupid, deluded, or worse. Hence there can be nothing wrong about declining to engage with them. Where there's no reasonable opposition, Mom's Maxim wins the

day. The right policy is to talk about momentous matters with only those who will agree with what you say.

The *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy is a compelling and effective way of seeming to have satisfied the demands of responsible believing while avoiding the risks of engagement. But it is simple-minded and confused.

It would be a nice world were it the case that on every important question there was but one obviously correct answer, and a brood of other answers that are so obviously incorrect that only the stupid or depraved could adopt them. Alas, the world we live in is much more complicated than that. Questions concerning religion, morality, and politics are so controversial precisely because they're so difficult. On almost every central question in these areas, one can find substantial disagreement among intelligent, honest, and sincere persons who are roughly equally informed of the relevant facts. This is due to the complexity of these issues. The *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy encourages us to think that with regard to the most important and perennial questions human beings can ask, there is but one simple and obvious answer, and every other proposed answer is demonstrably irrational, ignorant, or stupid. The *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy is for this reason simple-minded.

There's a tendency, understandable but ultimately misguided, to equate the recognition of the complexity of these issues with a 'who's to say?' variety of relativism. This 'who's to say?' view mistakenly infers from the fact of the complexity of these matters the conclusion that everyone's opinion is somehow correct, or at least just as good as anyone else's. But 'who's to say?' relativism is confused. That a group of well-intentioned, intelligent, and well-informed physicians disagree about the proper diagnosis of a given patient does not entail that the patient is not sick. That two detectives disagree about the proper interpretation of their evidence does not entail that no one committed the murder. That well-informed, sincere, and intelligent people

have different beliefs about religion, morality, and politics does not entail that no one's right.

To make sense of this, we need to introduce a distinction between the *truth* of a belief and the *justification* one has in holding it. The former is simple enough, at least for our purposes. A belief is true when it says something about the way the world is, and the world is that way. Here's a simple example. It is a fact that Harrison Ford majored in Philosophy in college. This means that the belief that Harrison Ford majored in Philosophy in college is true. The belief claims that something is the case which, as it turns out, *is* the case.

Now, imagine that our friend Abby believes that Harrison Ford majored in Philosophy in college, but she holds that belief because in the movie *Star Wars* Ford's character Han Solo says many philosophical things. Abby has a true belief. But her belief is not properly grounded. The fact that Ford once played a character that says many philosophical things is not a *good* reason to believe that Ford majored in Philosophy. Abby has a true belief, but she is not *justified* in her belief.

Now compare Abby with Bill. Bill believes that Harrison Ford majored in Philosophy in college; he believes this because he recently read Ford's autobiography in which Ford claims to have majored in Philosophy. That Ford claims to have majored in Philosophy in college provides *evidence* that he did. Thus Bill's reason for his belief is appropriately hooked up with what he believes; his belief is justified.

With this distinction in place, we can see how the *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy is not only simple-minded, but positively confused. Sadly, when confronted with disagreement people often turn instantly to efforts designed to make their interlocutors look silly or incompetent. As we argued above, this betrays a lack of regard for one's beliefs. When we show proper concern for our beliefs, we engage in argument not for the sake of making others look foolish, but rather for the sake of better apprehending the

truth. In proper argument, then, we try to exchange our evidence.

Consequently, properly conducted argument involves a *diagnostic* endeavor. When we look to our interlocutor's reasons for his beliefs, we are attempting to explain the fact that he asserts what we deny. We are trying to *explain* the fact of our disagreement. Now, disagreement has many sources. It is often the case that disagreements arise because the two disputants are drawing from radically different sets of evidence. Sometimes disagreement arises because the evidence is indeterminate or sketchy. Sometimes a dispute about one issue is due to a deeper dispute about what evidence there is. Sometimes the disputants share the same evidence, but weigh it differently. And so on. The point is that, among adults, it is rarely the case that anyone believes something that's not supported by what he or she takes to be the evidence. Accordingly, with most disputes, it is possible to rationally reconstruct the position of one's opponent: One can see that the opposing view proceeds from the opponent's conception of what the evidence is and how it is to be weighed. When argument succeeds, we still may see the other as having a false belief, but we will also grasp his reasons, such as they are, and be able to say something about why those reasons fall short.

Once we are able to diagnose disagreements in this way, we will be unable to regard those with whom we disagree as necessarily deluded, ignorant, wicked, or benighted. We will see them as nonetheless wrong, mistaken, and in error. But we will also see how, from their perspectives, their reasons, such as they are, are supposed to support their beliefs. We will see them as *reasonable*, that is, as fellow rational agents, who have, in ways that are identifiable and in principle remediable, made a mistake. Part of what it is to care about the truth about one's beliefs is to care about how reasonable people go wrong. This is in part the aim of argument. Perhaps it's the most important part.

To put the matter in a different way, we can say that there are *two* kinds of evaluation we are engaged in when arguing. First, we are trying to get a better grasp of the truth. To do this, we are surveying and evaluating the evidence that can be brought to bear on the issue. That requires talking to people who have different evidence, different evaluations of it, and so on. Second, we are trying to get a better grasp of the cognitive condition of the person with whom we are disagreeing. We are trying to find out what evidence he has, how he came to believe as he does, and how (or whether) his evidence supports his belief. In the first instance, we are evaluating beliefs; in the second, we are evaluating believers.

It is this nuance that the *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy fails to capture. It conflates *belief evaluation* with *believer evaluation*. Those using the *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy infer from the fact that one believes what is false (a belief evaluation) that one is stupid (a believer evaluation). But whether someone is stupid is not a question of what he believes, but rather of the relation between his beliefs and what he takes to be his evidence. The stupid person is someone who systematically and persistently believes against what he acknowledges as evidence, someone who cannot make the right connections between what he believes and what he *has reason to believe*. Someone with very limited access to the available evidence concerning a certain matter might, indeed, arrive at a seriously and obviously mistaken belief, but he would not therefore be stupid or irrational. But this is precisely the kind of judgment that the *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy encourages. It is therefore confused.

Conclusion

We have argued that the *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy is the dark side of Mom's Maxim. If we think that beliefs about religion, morality, and politics are indeed

momentous we should care most of all to get the *truth* about these topics. As we have seen, caring about the truth is not simply a matter of holding the right beliefs. Like caring for a child, caring about the truth is an ongoing process of *attending to* our beliefs and *looking after* the grounds upon which they rest. Caring about the truth of our momentous beliefs thus means caring about the reasons, evidence, and arguments of those with whom we disagree. It means taking care to get an accurate picture of what those reasons are. This requires us to discuss religion, morality and politics in mixed company. More importantly, caring about the truth requires us to acknowledge that, with respect to momentous issues, there is typically room for reasonable disagreement. Caring about the truth, then, requires us to reject the *No Reasonable Opposition* strategy and acknowledge that there are *reasonable* people who reject our momentous beliefs. In the end, those who think that how they live matters must embrace Mill's Principle and shun Mom's Maxim.

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