John Stuart Mill and the Antagonistic Foundation of Liberal Politics

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Abstract: The agonistic critique of liberalism argues that liberal theory unwisely eliminates conflict from the design of liberal-democratic institutions and understandings of liberal citizenship. John Stuart Mill anticipates and resolves the agonistic critique by incorporating several theories of antagonism into his political theory. At the institutional level, Mill places two antagonisms at the center of his political theory: the tension between the popular and bureaucratic elements in representative government, on the one hand, and that between the democratic and aristocratic elements in modern society, on the other. These tensions guarantee the fluidity of the political sphere. At the experiential level, Mill's embrace of antagonism is even more complete, as he argues that even our objectively correct opinions must be ceaselessly contested to become properly ours. The theory that emerges is both agonistic and liberal; further, it calls into question current liberal attitudes concerning conflict and antagonism.

Introduction

It is ironic that liberalism has recently been charged with unwisely eliminating conflict in the social and political spheres. Presumably, the sublimation of factional violence appears to be a unique strength of liberal politics. Nonetheless, a variety of agonistic critics, lamenting the demise of antagonism, contestation, or the “political,” have taken liberal theory to task for its pacifying, individualizing, and consensus-seeking tendencies. That liberal

1Stephen Holmes, one of liberalism’s most ardent defenders, argues precisely this, that liberalism profitably brackets normative debates that can find no satisfactory resolution otherwise. See Passions and Constraint: On the Theory of Liberal Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 202–35.

2Agonistic theorists come in a variety of forms and through an impressive diversity of intellectual traditions. Under the rubric of “democratic agonism” might be placed the work of Chantal Mouffe, who arrives at agonism through Carl Schmitt, and Sheldon Wolin, through Alexis de Tocqueville. The rubric of “existential agonism” is exemplified by William Connolly, through Nietzsche and Foucault, and Bonnie Honig, through Hannah Arendt. Proponents of “liberal agonism” include the self-creating liberal theories of George Kateb, through Emerson, and Richard Flathman; modus vivendi liberals, like the contemporary John Gray, fall into this category as
societies know economic and political competitors but no adversaries; that liberal theories seek to preempt conflict through institutions, procedures, and deliberative strategies; that liberalism's ideal of the purely rational, interest-driven individual is often at odds with the irrational yet inescapable pressures of group norms, community values, and religious concerns: even liberalism's defenders acknowledge the force of these objections.3

Yet, critiques of modernity and liberalism analogous to this one can be traced back as least as far as the middle of the nineteenth century. One particularly fierce critic, for example, blamed modernity for "the relaxation of individual energy and courage; the loss of proud and self-relying independence; the slavery of so large a portion of mankind to artificial wants; their effeminate shrinking from even the shadow of pain; the dull unexciting monotony of their lives, and the passionless insipidity, and absence of marked individuality, in their characters." Elsewhere this same critic lamented the effect on an increasingly "refined" society of "a moral effeminacy, an inaptitude for every kind of struggle," a society whose members "shrink from all effort, from everything which is troublesome and disagreeable" and who are characterized by "torpidity and cowardice." Anticipating the contemporary agonistic critique of liberalism, this critic championed the "great social function ... which in no government can remain permanently unfulfilled without condemning that government to infallible degeneracy and decay," that function which comprised "the only real security for continued progress": the "function of Antagonism." It may come as a surprise, then, that this critic was none other than the father of modern liberalism, John Stuart Mill.4

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Yet how fitting it is that Mill was capable of attacking a political doctrine of which he considered himself a prominent exponent. The tension between his inherited utilitarianism and his unique intellectual debt to Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the German Romantics has been well documented. His oscillation between the calculated rationalism and unrelenting progressivism of James Mill and Jeremy Bentham, on the one hand, and the organic conservative aesthetic that saved him from deep depression, on the other, has led some to classify Mill's thought as muddled and confused (if not schizophrenic!). Yet, if we are to take seriously the argument that liberalism is incapable of "acknowledging the ineradicability of the conflictual dimension in social life," then we must at least reconcile this claim to evidence that Mill, for one, located centrally in his thought a theory of social and political conflict. This theory of conflict is the focus of what follows.

I develop Mill's liberal theory of antagonism alongside what I view as two distinct, if intimately related, agonistic critiques of liberalism. The first critique is institutional and holds that liberalism, in seeking to weed out sources of conflict through procedure or consensus, effectively eliminates the spirit of politics, which thrives on continuous contestation and change. The second charge pertains to the ways in which individuals experience liberal citizenship: it argues that liberalism homogenizes ways of being by offering a universal idea of personhood defined by individual rights, rational self-interest, and material preferences. I argue that Mill envisions two antagonisms that anticipate both critiques. The first antagonism obtains at the institutional level and is a unique feature of Mill's political thinking; the second obtains at the level of social and political experience and constitutes a vital component of Mill's conception of the liberal self. The result of this examination is an argument, made from a liberal perspective, for affirming the

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7Moufie, On the Political, 4.
value of antagonism. This argument constitutes grounds for reexamining contemporary liberal attitudes towards conflict and antagonism.

Institutional Antagonism

This section identifies (a) the agonistic rejoinder to liberalism at the institutional level, which is twofold: first, the shape of liberal-democratic institutions must remain fluid if the political is to exist at all; second, contestation must play a central role in the polity. Next, I show that both agonistic objections are anticipated by Mill's theory of institutional antagonism, which is articulated as (b) the popular/bureaucratic antagonism, and (c) the democratic/aristocratic antagonism. These antagonisms are shown to be, properly, liberal antagonisms (d).

A. The Agonistic Critique

One way of articulating the agonistic critique of liberalism is through the liberal-democratic paradox. The paradox is contained in the fact that, on the one hand, liberalism requires fixed limits on state power, while, on the other, democracy requires that popular sovereignty be unlimited. A liberal-democratic political theory must negotiate this tension somehow, and agonists contend that contemporary liberal-democratic theory comes down much too decisively on the liberal side of the question. In a review of Rawls' *Political Liberalism* (1993), for example, Sheldon Wolin argues that "democracy should not depend on elites making a one-time gift to the demos of a predesigned framework of equal rights"; that truly democratic rights "depend on the demos winning them, extending them substantively, and, in the process, acquiring experience of the political." Democracy does not require "paying deference to a formal principle of popular sovereignty" or "stipulating that reasonable principles of justice be in place from the beginning." What democracy *does* require is "continuing political education" and efforts to ensure "the experiences of justice and injustice serve as moments for the demos to think, to reflect, perchance to construct themselves as actors." Democracy, according to Wolin, "is about the continuing self-fashioning of the demos." To agonists, Rawls's vision of a "well-ordered democracy" appears oxymoronic.  


9Wolin, "The Liberal/Democratic Divide," 118. Agonism takes its name from the Greek *αγων*, meaning "contest." The agonistic literature draws considerable
Two specific agonistic rejoinders to the liberal project can be derived from this view. First, agonists reject the prepolitical—the fixing of political institutions such as rights and principles of justice from a place that is not subject to ongoing public debate. The agonists charge that contemporary liberals, particularly those in the social contractarian tradition, seek to answer important political questions out of time through an act of founding or prepolitical reasoning. Instead, agonists argue, political questions should be confronted in the realm of the political, where institutions are allowed to develop—often painfully—over time. Put simply, political theory and politics should be ongoing processes with no determinate endpoint. Second, agonists encourage the development of institutions through ceaseless contestation. Just as they reject the prepolitical, they likewise reject the postpolitical. Specific to our purposes is their embrace of contestation over consensus-seeking or nonpartisan politics; agonism thrives on conflict, challenge, and even bitterness.

The rest of this section describes two aspects of Mill’s broader theory of antagonism, drawn largely from Considerations of Representative Government, that anticipate these dual charges from the agonists. These antagonisms are, first, between the popular and bureaucratic elements in a representative system, and, second, between the democratic and aristocratic elements in the modern age. They comprise what Mill describes as “a fundamental maxim of government”: namely, “a center of resistance to the predominant power in the Constitution,” which, in the case of representative government, takes the form of “a nucleus of resistance to the democracy.”


Mouffe cites so-called third way politics in the West as an example of “postpolitical” politicking. Mouffe, On the Political, 56–60.

CRG, CW, 19:515. Likewise, Mill writes in “Bentham,” CW, 10:108: “A centre of resistance, round which all the moral and social elements which the ruling power views with disfavour may cluster themselves, and behind whose bulwarks they may find shelter from the attempts of that power to hunt them out of existence, is as necessary where the opinion of the majority is sovereign, as where the ruling power is a hierarchy or an aristocracy.” Mill owes a conspicuous debt to Tocqueville on this point. As Sheldon Wolin writes, Tocqueville’s contrast between aristocracy and the new world of democracy is an attempt “to teach democracy the importance of providing a counterprinciple at the center of its own system” (Wolin, Presence of
Two notes before we delve into these theories of antagonism. First, what follows is not an attempt to refute or otherwise invalidate the agonistic critique of liberalism. Mill's theories are unlikely to satisfy agonists, particularly because primary agonistic concerns such as inclusion and equality are less important to Mill than, say, progress and individual development. Though Mill's antagonistic liberalism rejects any suggestion (agonistic or otherwise) that liberalism is somehow inherently opposed to social and political antagonism—to the political—in doing so, it should remind contemporary liberals of something they have lost—a qualified embrace of antagonism articulated from a distinctly liberal set of premises.

Second, I acknowledge that this is not the first study to identify the institutional tension in Mill's political theory. However, scholars have typically employed two interpretative techniques in dealing with Mill's apparently contradictory allegiances to democratic participation and governing competence. The first technique is qualified dismissal: Mill was confused, or simply wrong, and we should be aware of this confusion when we extract his political theory. In this vein, R. P. Anschutz writes that "Mill's political thinking developed along two quite different and inconsistent lines," an inconsistency of which he was, himself, unaware. The second technique is one of attempted reconciliation. This approach assumes Mill was conscious of the tension between his allegiances to both participation and competence, and that their resolution comprises the modus operandi of his democratic theory. In Dennis Thompson's seminal study of Mill's democratic theory, for example, the "synthesis" of the conflicting principles is possible, first, through institutional designs and outcomes that sufficiently "realize both values simultaneously," and, second, "by the gradual improvement of the competence of all citizens through participation." More recently, Nadia Urbinati has argued that the "dialectic between competence and participation" represents Mill's "central contribution to democratic theory."

The interpretation that follows remedies what is lacking in these approaches. The tensions present in Mill's political theory are both intentional and, importantly, deliberately unresolved. This is to say that Mill was aware of the challenges inherent in developing a well-governed polity that claimed both liberal and democratic allegiances, and, further, that he did not expect these challenges to disappear anytime soon. In fact, the ongoing tension

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14Nadia Urbinati, Mill on Democracy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 44.
and even antagonism between these two principles ensures the progress and maintenance of liberal democracy.

**B. The Popular/Bureaucratic Antagonism**

The first antagonism is that which exists between the *demos*—which must assume what Mill terms the "controlling power" in the *polis*—and the professional bureaucrats needed for the smooth and efficient operation of government. In a representative government, the antagonism between these two elements is necessary to remedy one of two "positive evils and dangers" of democracy: "general ignorance and incapacity, or, to speak more moderately, insufficient mental qualifications, in the controlling body." The bureaucratic element corrects the self-destructive forces of the untrained masses by providing "the great advantage of the conduct of affairs by skilled persons": compiling, analyzing, and dispersing information and advice to its controllers.

Mill partitions separate roles for the two forces based on the "radical distinction between controlling the business of government, and actually doing it." The multitude is not fit to *do*, so to speak, in the sense that they lack the statecraft—the political savoir faire—to procure the correct means for a given end. Instead of doing the work of government, "the proper

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15Jonathan Riley writes that citizens of a democracy must exercise "political competence"—a more general ability to identify worthwhile political ends—while its governors (or administrators) must exercise "skilled competence"—the ability to design means to meet ends. From Riley, "Mill's Neo-Athenian Model of Liberal Democracy," in John Stuart Mill's Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment, ed. Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 227.

16CRG, CW, 19: 436. Mill's "Many" were not cave-dwellers, but he held no illusion that they were fit to govern, or even to vote—an act he argued constituted "power over others" (CRG, CW, 470, 488–89). The two things standing between the masses of modern Britain and an ideal body of active citizens were low levels of education and a widespread lack of leisure necessary to develop administrative skills (CRG, CW, 467–81). See Zakaras, "J. S. Mill, Individuality, and Participatory Democracy," in Reassessment.


18CRG, CW, 19: 423. For the view that the two roles are mutually constraining, see Thompson, John Stuart Mill and Representative Government, 3–11. For a contrary argument—that the two roles are mutually reinforcing—see J. Joseph Miller, "J. S. Mill on Plural Voting, Competence, and Participation," History of Political Thought 24 (2003): 647–67.
office of a representative assembly is to watch and control the government," which requires it to "throw the light of publicity upon its acts," "to compel a full exposition and justification of all of them which any one considers questionable," and the like, all of which is "surely ample power, and security enough for the liberty of a nation." There exists, then, a continuous dialectic between the amateur Many and the professional Few: the Many determine through deliberation the appropriate ends to pursue; the Few propose a plan for obtaining those ends; the Many deliberatively evaluate the proposed policies and the performance of its opposing element; new ends are formulated and submitted; and so on. Through this process, the freedom of the masses is reconciled with the knowledge required by governance. Mill negotiates the liberal-democratic paradox by ensuring that those who determine the formal conditions of liberal democracy are continuously checked and watched by the democratic public.

The obvious question at this point is why this tension should be viewed as properly antagonistic, and not complementary. Why, in Mill's view, is the relationship between the public and its bureaucrats characterized by conflict and not harmony or cooperation? In this case, antagonism arises because the ascribed tasks—controlling and doing—represent self-contained logics. He writes:

In all human affairs, conflicting influences are required, to keep one another alive and efficient even for their own proper uses; and the exclusive pursuit of one good object, apart from some other which should accompany it, ends not in excess of one and defect of the other, but in the decay and loss even of that which has been exclusively cared for. Government by trained officials cannot do, for a country, the things which can be done by a free government; but it might be supposed capable of doing some things which free government, of itself, cannot do. We find, however, that an outside element of freedom is necessary to enable it to do effectually or permanently even its own business. And so, also, freedom cannot produce its best effects, and often breaks down altogether, unless means can be found of combining it with trained and skilled administration.

Left unchecked, bureaucracy decays into "pedantocracy," the unfortunate result of its lack of "energy of mind," its debilitating dependence on "routine," that process by which everything "loses its vital principle, and having no longer a mind acting within it, goes on revolving mechanically.

19CRG, CW, 19:432. Whether this role for the Many is sufficiently democratic has been the subject of much debate. A particularly illuminating description of the elitist/democratic tension in Mill's thought is Graeme Duncan's discussion of Mill's "democratic Platonism." See Duncan, Marx and Mill, 259.

20As Holmes writes, this arrangement means that "experts ... would be on tap, not on top" (Passions, 191).

though the work it is intended to do remains undone.”22 Likewise, left unopposed by wiser minds, democratic assemblies are prone to “countenance, or impose, a selfish, a capricious and impulsive, a short-sighted, ignorant, and prejudiced general policy ... [to] abrogate good laws, or enact bad ones, let in new evils, or cling with perverse obstinacy to old; it will even, perhaps ... tolerate or connive at proceedings which set law aside altogether, in cases where equal justice would not be agreeable to popular feeling.”23 Mill puts these two elements in conflict and not in tandem because each is propelled by its own internal motion.24 Bureaucracy single-mindedly aims at the completion of its routines and tasks. It has little time for deliberation, for a diversity of voices, or for democracy. It must be compelled to submit to deliberation, just as the multitude must be compelled by institutions, often against a short-sighted view of the national interest, to heed the advice and warning of those who advise and warn.

Just how important democratic vitality is to Mill appears more clearly when juxtaposed with the utilitarian legal theory he inherited and the Comteian positivism he ultimately rejected. He does not share Bentham’s drive to establish a “Pannomion,” a great utilitarian matrix of laws that would maximize utility at every turn. Even as he celebrates his godfather in the essay “On Bentham,” he chides him, nonetheless, for his “one-eyed” penchant for “supposing that the business part of human affairs was the whole of them.” Bentham’s is a philosophy of legal and political means, but it is mistaken if it seeks to determine the social ends that are derived solely from the “national character.”25 Likewise, Mill rejects his friend Auguste Comte’s technocratic model, which recommends an entirely separate and sovereign body of elites who, through superior wisdom and training, would construct a society that maximized order and human progress. Mill accused Comte’s proposals of “liberticide,” not because they overemphasized the role of bureaucrats in modern governments, but because they effectively removed political elites from meaningful public scrutiny.26 This is not to deny

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22CRG, CW, 19:439.
24There is an interesting parallel between the popular/bureaucratic antagonism and Mill’s discussion in A System of Logic of the relationship between art and science (and, correspondingly, imagination and reason). He writes: “The relation in which rules of art stand to doctrines of science may be thus characterized. The art proposes to itself an end to be attained, defines the end, and hands it over to the science. The science receives it, considers it as a phenomenon or effect to be studied, and having investigated its causes and conditions, sends it back to art with a theorem of the combinations of circumstances by which it could be produced. Art then examines these combinations of circumstances, and according as any of them are or are not in human power, pronounces the end attainable or not” (System of Logic, CW, 8:944).
altogether Mill's elitism, but rather to point out that his elites are produced organically and democratically; they must be derived from the public by democratic means, and they must be subject to a critical public. Comte's technocracy represents "spiritual despotism." Bentham and Comte prescribe prepolitical solutions to democracy's problems, and Mill rejects them for precisely that reason.

C. The Democratic/Aristocratic Antagonism

The second great danger of democracy—that of "sinister interests," those "interests conflicting more or less with the general good of the community"—is likewise counteracted with an antagonism of its own—the tension between democratic and aristocratic elements. In a representative government, the "sinister interest" most likely to threaten the common good is majority interest. Mill did not share Madison's belief that, in a constitutional republic, popular opinion would be filtered by its representatives, "whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country." In fact, the

27By definition, a separate body of elites—whether maintained only at the moment of founding or as a permanent check on popular institutions—removes at least part of the controlling power from the demos. If it removes too little, leaving the majority free to overrule elites at any critical junction, then, Mill argues, the elite body guarantees its perpetual defeat by setting itself apart and against the population, as a foreign body (CRG, CW, 19:514–15). If, instead, the elites retain the ultimate controlling power, then Mill asserts the system is more accurately labeled despotism—this is his crucial departure from Comte's brand of elitism ("Auguste Comte and Positivism," CW, 10:314).

28Ibid. Linda Raeder has recently argued in John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002) that Mill's agreements with Comte are much more consistent and consequential than previously recognized. On her reading, Mill and Comte share the desire to "[establish] a method by which philosophers can reach unanimity regarding moral and political truths" (79). See also Joseph Hamburger, John Stuart Mill on Liberty and Control (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). However, the idea that Mill sought unanimity on questions of moral and political truth is unconvincing. As Mill writes in his Autobiography, "some particular body of doctrine in time rallies the majority round it, organizes social institutions and modes of action comfortably to itself, education suppresses this new creed upon the new generations without the mental processes that have led to it, and by degrees it acquires the very same power of compression, so long exercised by the creeds of which it had taken place. Whether this noxious power will be exercised, depends on whether mankind have by that time become aware that it cannot be exercised without stunting and dwarfing human nature. It is then that the teachings of the 'Liberty' will have their greatest value" ("Autobiography," CW, 1:259–60). See also chapter 2 of OL, "On the Liberty of Thought and Discussion."

29CRG, CW, 19:441. Mill borrows the term "sinister interests" from Bentham.

kind of representative elected in a modern democracy will likely not be a "representative" at all, but rather a "delegate" whose eagerness to vote in sectional or class interests only increases with the trappings and responsibilities of political power.\textsuperscript{31} This movement to a delegate-centered democracy is further exacerbated by the extension of the franchise to new and typically uneducated classes. "The natural tendency of representative government," a descent to "collective mediocrity," ensures that citizens "of a much higher calibre" increasingly find themselves defeated in elections and, finally, underrepresented politically.\textsuperscript{32} This, in turn, leads to the increased presence of class sectionalism.\textsuperscript{33} A countervailing influence to democracy's short-sightedness is needed.

The search for such a countervailing influence led Mill to endorse electoral practices like open polling, plural voting, and Thomas Hare's system of proportional representation (now sometimes referred to as a system of single-transferable vote), all of which sought to establish an elite counterbalance to the increasing popular element in British government.\textsuperscript{34} As the franchise extended and the middle class expanded, Mill feared the emergence of majority tyranny that would, without opposition to check its ascent, grow ever more hostile to minority interests. The proposed counterbalances—particularly Hare's proposal, which Mill hoped might provide the "instructed minority" with a representative "organ"—would erect a "point d'appui," a

\textsuperscript{31}CRG, CW, 19:486.
\textsuperscript{32}CRG, CW, 19:456–57. At times, Mill uses "aristocracy" in the more traditional sense of denoting landed elites. See, for example, "De Tocqueville on Democracy in American[1]," CW, 18:63, 78. In CRG, however, Mill's notion of aristocracy is considerably closer to a meritocratic elite; see, for example, his discussion of the relevant qualifications for plural voting in chapter 8.
\textsuperscript{33}As an anonymous reviewer points out, there is a third structural antagonism present in CRG existing between "labourers" and "employers of labour," which Mill describes in the closing pages of chapter 6. I do not include this source of conflict in the discussion of Mill's theory of antagonistic liberalism for three reasons: first, "class legislation" is for Mill endemic to all forms of government, not only or even especially to liberal democracies (CRG, CW, 19:446); second, the class antagonism is a kind of subset of the more general "democratic" logic that partakes in the democratic/aristocratic antagonism; third, Mill gives no evidence in CRG that class antagonism can be productive in the way structural antagonism is.
\textsuperscript{34}Efforts have recently been made to rehabilitate Mill's more antidemocratic proposals. See Miller, "Plural Voting"; Urbinati, \textit{Mill on Democracy}, 93–104. Open polling, for example, was a way of subjecting average, self-interested citizens to the public-minded and contentious eye of their intellectual betters; plural voting sought to award educated citizens with a disproportionate electoral voice; Hare's system would replace the relatively small and often uneducated candidates of local districts with a greater selection of candidates culled from the nation's best citizens. On plural voting, CRG, CW, 19:473–74; on open polling, 493–95; on Hare's system, 448–66.
representative foothold for minority opinions, particularly those that ran against the "ascendant public opinion."\textsuperscript{35}

Even as a small minority, such an elite foothold would greatly improve the quality of representative deliberation, for "as a moral power they would count for much more, in virtue of their knowledge, and of the influence it would give them over the rest."\textsuperscript{36} Having a handful of wise and skilled advocates of the common good in a representative assembly would be enough to cast light on the force of their arguments. Mill does not question the outcome when an "able man," one of the "champions of unpopular doctrines," appears on the open field.\textsuperscript{37} The hero would cause the improvement of his inferiors, whose "minds would be insensibly raised by the influence of the mind with which they were in contact, or even in conflict," and the public would watch as "the opposing ranks would meet face to face and hand to hand, and there would be a fair comparison of their intellectual strength, in the presence of the country." Mill was confident these heroic individuals would emerge, for "the multitude have often a true instinct for distinguishing an able man, when he has the means of displaying his ability in the fair field before them."\textsuperscript{38} In this way, representative government secures "its habitual group of superior and guiding minds," its "leaders of a higher grade of intellect and character"—its heroes, its "occasional Pericles."\textsuperscript{39}

Recall that the bureaucratic and democratic elements must be placed in opposition because of their internal dynamics. Each manifests a self-contained logic, a forceful disposition towards the resolution of its animating principle: bureaucracy moving naturally, but powerfully, to a universal routinization; democracy toward a willful and chaotic despotism. They do not, in their interactions, seek to improve or complete the other. Each element negotiates the obstacles put forward by the other; they are, properly, antagonists. The conflict between them is a ceaseless dialectic that must be preserved if either component—both of which are essential to liberal democracy—is to be stopped from descending into despotism. Likewise, the short-sighted democratic majority must be placed in ongoing opposition to the instructed minority. Representative and delegate interests cannot be reconciled through cooperation or consensus because they do not share a common interest.

This irreconcilability is both a modern phenomenon and a more general principle of politics. That is, the majority is propelled by its class interests, on the one hand, and its interests as a majority on the other. The spread of

\textsuperscript{35}CRG, CW, 19:459.
\textsuperscript{36}CRG, CW, 19:460.
\textsuperscript{38}CRG, CW, 19:458.
\textsuperscript{39}CRG, CW, 19:460.
democratic institutions pushes the majority towards hegemony: "[P]artly by intention, and partly unconsciously, it is ever striving to make all other things bend to itself; and is not content while there is anything which makes permanent head against it, any influence not in agreement with its spirit."40 This point should be stressed: the danger of the majority is partly its contingent characteristics—in Mill's case, its middling and middle-class values. There is perhaps more danger, however, in its timeless qualities as the ascendant social and political power. The aristocracy is needed to check the majority's interests, yet this is just the modern instance of the permanent rule that any power approaching absoluteness must be checked to preserve the possibility of good government.

In this way, Mill seeks to preserve a healthy antagonism in the face of democracy's march to consensus. This spirited contestation constitutes "a great social function ... which in no government can remain permanently unfulfilled without condemning that government to infallible degeneracy and decay ... [which] may be called the function of Antagonism."41 Conflict in Mill's liberal society is not sublimated or otherwise neutralized in an attempt to reach a postpolitical state. Rather, antagonism and difference are publicized and made a central component of the political scene. His is the ineradicable pluralism that so inspired Isaiah Berlin—the polity comprised of many ultimately unconnected roads to the good life.42 From a position that celebrated antagonism among divergent interests and identities, he derides Comte's postpolitical fons errorum, his "inordinate demand for 'unity,'" his "universal systematizing, systematizing, systematizing."43 Clearly, Mill's democratic theory is properly called "antagonistic."

D. "Antagonistic" but not "Agonistic"

As I have argued, Mill's approach to democracy shares much with contemporary theorists of democratic agon: like the agonists, he rejects an overly proceduralist and bureaucratic approach to politics—he rejects prepolitical solutions to political problems—and he rejects a consensus-based approach to politics whereby decision-making power is confined to either elites or majorities—that is, he rejects postpolitical solutions to political problems.

40 CRG, CW, 19:458. Mill's tone here strikes a Nietzschean chord. Others have noted the parallels between Nietzsche and Mill: see Devigne, Reforming Liberalism, 182–85.
41 CRG, CW, 19:458.
Along similar lines, Nadia Urbinati argues that Mill’s democratic theory articulates and even “upholds” an agonistic version of deliberative democracy.\(^{44}\) Inspired by the Athenian modes of agon and agora, Urbinati’s Mill recommends a model of representative democracy that cultivates an inclusive and potentially tumultuous culture of participation and self-government. While allowing for bureaucratic expertise and some measure of independent judgment on the part of elected officials—what Urbinati describes as “advocacy”—she emphasizes the need to hear the “voice” of all citizens and to “develop a notion of representative democracy as an open and regulated competition that presume[s] everyone ha[s] the equal opportunity to participate in and refine their individual capacities to judge on public issues.”\(^{45}\)

Yet, placing Mill’s political thought side-by-side with contemporary agonism goes equally far in revealing the limits to such a comparison. Mill advocated plural voting, for example, not primarily in order to “preserve pluralism,” as Urbinati suggests, or to amplify the voice of minorities that too often find themselves at the margins of political decision-making, as Charles Beitz has proposed.\(^{46}\) To say with Urbinati that, for Mill, “basic equality was prior,” whereas “plural voting was prudential, expedient, and convenient,” is both to elide the deep ambivalence Mill felt toward universal franchise and to confuse a matter on which he is clear.\(^{47}\) Mill did not consider democratic equality a fundamental good, “as among the things that are good in themselves, provided they can be guarded against inconveniences”; rather, he thought it “only relatively good . . . but in principle wrong, because recognizing a wrong standard.” In fact, it is the plural vote that is not “in itself undesirable.”\(^{48}\)

Thus, to whatever degree contemporary agonists see contest and competition as means to a more inclusive, more egalitarian democratic politics, their views are not Mill’s. His politics are antagonistic, but they are not agonistic. Mill justifies plural voting on the grounds that it will generate a healthy antagonism between the “much and the little educated,” particularly in light of the rapid ascendancy of the latter.

Those who are supreme over everything, whether they be One, or Few, or Many, have no longer need of the arms of reason: they can make their mere will prevail; and those who cannot be resisted are usually far too well satisfied with their own opinions to be willing to change them, or listen without impatience to any one who tells them that they are in the wrong. The position which gives the strongest stimulus to the growth of intelligence is that of rising into power, not that of having achieved it; and of all

\(^{44}\)Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, xi, 82.

\(^{45}\)Ibid., 46.


\(^{47}\)Urbinati, *Mill on Democracy*, 96.

\(^{48}\)CRG, CW, 19:478, emphasis added.
resting-points, temporary or permanent, in the way to ascendancy, the one which develops the best and highest qualities is the position of those who are strong enough to make reason prevail, but not strong enough to prevail against reason. This is the position in which, according to the principles we have laid down, the rich and the poor, the much and the little educated, and all the other classes and denominations which divide society between them, ought as far as practicable to be placed.49

Mill justifies antagonism on the grounds that contest stimulates "the growth of intelligence," thus giving it a normative footing on par with that ascribed to democratic equality.50

Mill's efforts to incorporate persistent institutional antagonisms are motivated by the notion, prevalent throughout his writing, that antagonism creates unique and important benefits for its participants. Understanding these benefits and their relationship to modern liberal-democratic politics and culture is essential to understanding the role of antagonism in his democratic theory. After establishing this role in the previous section, I now turn to Mill's understanding of the experience of antagonism in order to provide an answer to the question: why not cooperation or compensation, why antagonism, specifically?

**Experiential Antagonism**

This section will examine the experiential aspects of Mill's theory of antagonism. It first describes the (a) agonistic critique of liberalism at the experiential level. Through (b) an account of Mill's view of the modern condition and (c) a description of the experiential theory of antagonism contained in On Liberty, I attempt to answer the questions, what is it specifically about antagonistic relations that yields better outcomes than indifference or cooperation? Is there something unique about relating to others antagonistically? Do we experience conflict differently than we do deliberation or polite conversation?

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49CRG, CW, 19:478–79, emphasis added. For Mill on plural voting, see chapter 8 of CRG. Urbinati's treatment of Mill's plurality proposal ultimately runs aground precisely because she takes an agonistic principle (equality) for Mill's principle (utility). See especially Urbinati, Mill on Democracy, 93–103.

50Mill suggests that if plurality and suffrage extension proved incommensurable, it was the expansion of suffrage—and not plural voting—that should be constrained: "[I]f the most numerous class, which ... is the lowest in the educational scale, refuses to recognise a right in the better educated, in virtue of their superior qualifications, to such plurality of votes as may prevent them from being always and hopelessly outvoted by the comparatively incapable, the numerical majority must submit to have the suffrage limited to such portion of their numbers, or to have such a distribution made of the constituencies, as may effect the necessary balance between numbers and education in another manner" (Mill, "Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform," CW, 19:325).
I argue that, for Mill, the *experience of antagonism* is fundamental in developing a more robust understanding of our beliefs—whose weaknesses and strengths are revealed only in contest with opposing opinions—and, more important, it is critical in producing reflective, autonomous individuals.

### A. The Agonistic Critique

For contemporary agonists, the disappearance of conflict in the everyday lives of liberal citizens has led to the disappearance of opportunities to reflect on the relationship between ourselves and others, and the circumstances of our own identities.\(^5\) Contestation, at the experiential level, is a process of self- and other-discovery in which the confrontation with an opposed identity brings out in strong relief the contingency of interpersonal boundaries.

This lack of occasion for reflection is exacerbated by the liberal penchant for universalizing a view of citizenship and personhood that is not, by many accounts, universal. If it can be said that liberal citizens must meet some very minimal standard of personhood—whether it be speaking secular language or a capacity for public reason—then the agonists would add that even this low threshold of inclusion engenders a "remainder," a "constitutive outside," a collection of individuals who do not make the cut. No matter how low the bar is set, agonists argue, the fact that there is a bar is always enough to create an excluded set of irrational or otherwise defective individuals. Agonists seek to contest established liberal identities in an effort to do justice to oft-excluded lifestyles and group norms, and to the ways in which, according to William Connolly, "life overflows the boundaries of identity."\(^5\)

In what follows I will argue that Mill shares the agonists' concerns, and that he does so from a uniquely liberal perspective. Mill's masterwork, *On Liberty*, has long been championed as the definitive civil libertarian justification of alternative and eccentric lifestyles, particularly because Mill himself was fighting the bourgeois sway of Victorian England when he wrote the essay in 1859. His advice to a nation experiencing a great social and political transition was agonistic in spirit, as he entreated his countrymen to practice tolerance but not indifference. Mill's liberal antagonism, as it exists at the

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\(^5\) Connolly, *Identity/Difference*, 166.
experiential level, begins with the experience of modernity and ends with a call to increased moral conflict.

**B. “The Spirit of the Age” and the Parable of the Desert Caravan**

In an early essay titled “The Spirit of the Age,” Mill pronounces his nineteenth century as a time “pregnant for change.” The ancient doctrines, religious and political, have lost much of their force—they have been “outgrown,” but not yet replaced with surrogate dogmas. Yet the problem is greater than a mere changing of the ideological guards, Mill warns, for “society demands, and anticipates, not merely a new machine, but a machine constructed in another manner.” The old doctrines have been abandoned, but so have the old ways of indoctrination.

Mill diagnosed his age with a case of “intellectual anarchy”; a condition in which “the divisions among the instructed nullify their authority, and the uninstructed lose their faith in them.” Presaging Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God, he warns that “the multitude are without a guide.” For two reasons, he is skeptical that the transitional age can be stemmed. First, there is society’s increasing taste for discussion, for, after all, “to discuss, and to question established opinions, are merely two phrases for the same thing.” The proliferation of discussion has cast more light by more lanterns on the old doctrines than ever before. No received opinion is left unilluminated, and most wilt in the light of rational examination.

The second contributing factor to this transition is the onset of the democratic age. If “in an age of transition the source of all improvement is the exercise of private judgment,” then it is unsurprising that “every dabbler [in the normative sciences] . . . thinks his opinion as good as another’s.” With something resembling bemusement, Mill writes:

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53 Scholars of Mill’s work dispute the relationship between the early piece “Spirit of the Age” and Mill’s subsequent work—particularly On Liberty. For a brief overview of the dispute, see Richard B. Friedman, “An Introduction to Mill’s Theory of Authority,” in John Stuart Mill’s Social and Political Thought: Critical Assessments, ed. G. W. Smith (New York, NY: Routledge, 1998). While I find the view that “Spirit” is largely a product of a youthful enthusiasm for the St. Simonians to be a persuasive one, I do not think the tension is consequential here.


55 Ibid., 231.

56 George Kateb’s theory of democratic individuality—which is as much a powerful defense of the liberal ethos as it is the democratic condition—is built around Nietzsche’s pronouncement as well. Kateb, Inner Ocean, 136–39. This early essay is also one of the best examples of Mill’s intellectual debts to the Romantic tradition. On the modern debt to Romanticism, see Charles Larmore, The Romantic Legacy (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996).

Any man who has eyes and ears shall be judge whether, in point of fact, a person who has never studied politics, for instance, or political economy systematically, regards himself as any-way precluded thereby from promulgating with the most unbounded assurance the crudest opinions, and taxing men who have made those sciences the occupation of a laborious life, with the most contemptible ignorance and imbecility.\(^{58}\)

With the decline of authority and tradition, modern civilization is left with two options: cling to the vestiges of authority or embrace the frightening possibilities of liberty. Mill illustrates the predicament of modern man with a parable:

[If a caravan of travellers had long been journeying in an unknown country under a blind guide, with what earnestness would the wiser among them exhort the remainder to use their own eyes, and with what disfavour would any one be listened to who should insist upon the difficulty of finding their way, and the necessity of procuring a guide after all. He would be told with warmth, that they had hitherto missed their way solely from the fatal weakness of allowing themselves to be guided, and that they never should reach their journey's end until each man dared to think and see for himself. And it would perhaps be added (with a smile of contempt), that if he were sincere in doubting the capacity of his fellow-travellers to see their way, he might prove his sincerity by presenting each person with a pair of spectacles, by means whereof their powers of vision might be strengthened, and all indistinctness removed. The men of the past are those who continue to insist upon our still adhering to the blind guide. The men of the present are those who bid each man look about for himself, with or without the promise of spectacles to assist him.\(^{59}\)

The old guide has always been blind, and his authority has been maintained only by a willful blindness on the part of his followers. This is to say that the traditions of the past are, and have always been, wrong; they have remained because they have served society’s purposes. This ancient authority was eroded as the caravan’s members began to choose their own paths on the basis of their own judgment. Implicit in the parable is the coming of democratic majority tyranny—as the authority embodied in the guide disappears, it is reclaimed by those followers who do not wish to face the desert without a guide. Ultimately, the tale’s warning is clear—after the death of God, we moderns are thrust back into an “unknown country” where the territory is foreign and unfamiliar. We are confronted with an existence without the anchors of authority. We are required, to borrow Hannah Arendt’s metaphor, to think without banisters.\(^{60}\)

\(^{58}\)Ibid.

\(^{59}\)Ibid., 238–39.

This suggests that, if the modern age must come to rely exclusively on the private judgment of individuals, then much rides on the quality of individual faculties of judgment. One opinion which exists throughout Mill's work is the notion that individual judgments will be always and irrevocably incomplete; in fact, they will be eternally half-right. Mill's modern citizens suffer from an "incapacity of seeing more than one thing at a time," and whether they play it conservatively by clinging to the blind guide or trust themselves to their own paths of progress, "they have in general an invincible propensity to split the truth, and take half, or less than half of it; and a habit of erecting their quills and bristling up like a porcupine against any one who brings them the other half, as if he were attempting to deprive them of the portion which they have."61 The problem of the modern age, and the lesson of the caravan parable, is that liberal-democratic citizens have nothing to turn to but a mass of comfortably self-assured half-truths.

C. On Liberty and the Call to Antagonism

As we saw, the decline of traditional authority (social, political, and religious) has cast modern individuals back into an unfamiliar world. The spread of democratic egalitarianism charges each individual with the uncomfortable task of private judgment, even while the faculty of judgment is prone to half-truth and overconfidence—this comprises the modern predicament. Individuals need a modern method of arriving at their worldviews. Perhaps more importantly, they need a way of negotiating the collisions of conflicting worldviews in the new democratic age.

As Mill outlines in part 2 of On Liberty, unpopular opinion collides with popular opinion in one of three scenarios: the unpopular opinion contains the truth of the matter; the popular opinion contains the truth of the matter; or the truth is contained partially in both opinions.62 To illustrate the first case—where the unpopular opinion is actually correct—Mill invokes Socrates, who, through a "memorable collision" with the perceived truths of Athens, revolutionized the moral world of ancient Greece.63 The problem with even those moral truths held to be universal and undeniably absolute (such as Biblical truths) is that they are held to be so by fallible creatures—a fact that "is far from carrying the weight in their practical judgment, which is always allowed to it in theory; for while every one well knows himself to be fallible, few think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility."64 Mill develops a theory of moral logic whereby "the beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a

62 OL, CW, 28:258.
63 Ibid., 235.
64 Ibid., 229.
standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded," for "if the lists are kept open, we may hope that if there be a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the meantime we may rely on having attained such approach to truth, as is possible in our own day." Mill here is describing only "the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being." Tolerance is the best social policy for fallible creatures whose own moral opinions must be constantly checked, updated, and replaced by alternative moral views. Put another way, Mill's moral falsification recommends that individuals seek out challenges to their own beliefs in the hope that their own might be improved or even convincingly contradicted.

Skipping ahead to the third case, where both the popular and unpopular opinions contain some truth, Mill argues that "it is only by the collision of [these] adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied." This third case is the most common scenario, making society's ability to let opposing opinions seek reconciliation a matter of great importance. In Mill's description of the collisions between popular and unpopular opinion, both with legitimate claims to truth, his theory appears most in keeping with the Greek dialectic tradition. Yet, we should note how the language of antagonism remains prominent: "[T]ruth, in the great practical concerns of life," he writes, "is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites, that very few have minds sufficiently capacious and impartial to make the adjustment with an approach to correctness, and it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners."

Of course, there is nothing particularly novel or counterintuitive in calling for moral antagonism in cases where it will lead to improved opinions. However, it is the last case (the one Mill considers secondly) that reveals the novelty of Mill's experiential antagonism—it is this final case that has not received enough attention from liberal theorists. Abandoning momentarily the epistemological skepticism that has characterized the liberal case for freedom of conscience since Locke's "Letter Concerning Toleration,"

65Ibid., 232.
66Writes Mill, on the difference between properly philosophical tolerance and something he calls "indifference": "For among the truths long recognized by Continental philosophers, but which very few Englishmen have yet arrived at, one is, the importance, in the present imperfect state of mental and social science, of antagonist modes of thought: which, it will one day be felt, are as necessary to one another in speculation, as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution. A clear insight, indeed, into this necessity is the only rational or enduring basis of philosophical tolerance: the only condition under which liberality in matters of opinion can be anything better than a polite synonym for indifference between one opinion and another" ("Coleridge," CW, 10:122).
67OL, CW, 18:258.
68Ibid., 254.
Mill argues that the call to seek out moral opponents holds even for a scenario in which the popular opinion is actually the correct one. In Mill's view, moral truths— even if they are objectively true— have a tendency to become "dead" truths if they face no challenges from alternative viewpoints.  

These moral truths are "full of meaning and vitality" when they originate, and their full force is felt by all who fight to see them triumph. Should the doctrine win out, however, and become the dominant moral force in a society, "its progress stops," "controversy on the subject flags," and "from this time may usually be dated the decline in the living power of the doctrine."  

Living moral truths turn to doctrines and then to dogmas, and they tend to affect close-minded stubbornness rather than vigorous truth-seeking. Keeping moral truths alive requires one to defend them every so often. Mill's point is that even if we stumble upon true opinion, we can still hold it in the wrong way. We cannot make a belief our own—we cannot inhabit a belief—until we have explored its every nook and cranny. To explore our own doctrines is to self-reflect and, hopefully, to self-fashion; it is to explore the depths of our own existence; and it is accomplished by interacting with those who hold opposing beliefs in relationships characterized fundamentally by antagonism.  

One can hold a true belief without knowing why it is true (one recalls Mill's famous line: "[H]e who knows only his side of the case, knows little of that"). To cultivate one's own belief—to make it as forceful as possible in both one's own mind and the minds of others—one must develop, enlarge, and explain it in relation to alternative truths. Those who correctly hold true beliefs are convinced not only of the veracity of their convictions, but also the falsity of competing claims—one must be aware of why one's beliefs are entitled to their veracity, particularly in light of one's own unrelenting fallibility. If one's position cannot be successfully defended, then one actually knows nothing at all—likewise, one knows nothing about oneself. For this reason, Mill goes so far as to recommend "that if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is

69Ibid., 247-50.
70Ibid., 247.
71Jeremy Waldron, considering the harm principle, notes that the "distress" that often comes with having others challenge our most deeply held belief does not constitute "harm" in an actionable sense. In fact, Waldron argues, this discomfort is one of the benefits of liberty. See "Mill and the Value of Moral Distress," Political Studies 35 (1987): 410–23.
73OL, CW, 18:245.
74Much has recently been made of Mill's affinity for Socrates and the Greeks more generally. See especially Dana Villa, Socratic Citizenship (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Urbinati, Mill on Democracy; Devigne, Reforming Liberalism.
indispensable to imagine them, and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skillful devil’s advocate can conjure up.”

The upshot of such antagonism is the development of an individual capable of something Mill often refers to as “character,” a person described in part 3 of On Liberty as one “whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture.” The thrust of words like “impulses” and “desires” suggests an often neglected theme in Mill’s discussion of liberty: the central role of “strength,” of “natural feeling,” of “strong impulses,” which are but another name for energy,” and which are “the stuff of heroes.” It is only now, in the modern age, when “society” has finally “got the better of individuality,” when the “difficulty” of “induc[ing] men of strong bodies or minds to pay obedience to any rules which required them to control their impulses” has receded, that conditions are ripe for the active cultivation of strong characters. Liberty as expressed by the harm principle, because it provides an adequately but not overbearingly secure liberal framework, cultivates the “soil” in which can grow persons of genius—persons “more individual than any other people … less capable, consequently, of fitting themselves, without hurtful compression, into any of the small number of moulds which society provides in order to save its members the trouble of forming their own character.” That Mill would contrast this genius with “mediocrity” is perhaps common sense, but the contrast he makes between genius and “timidity” is in this case more suggestive. While On Liberty has gained much of its stature as an anti-conformist tract, it might just as easily be called an anti-torpidity tract, wherein the “general average of mankind” is described as “not only moderate in intellect, but also moderate in inclinations,” as having “no tastes or wishes strong enough to incline them to do anything unusual,” who “desire nothing strongly,” and whose “ideal of character is to be without any marked character: to maim by compression, like a Chinese lady’s foot, every part of human nature which stands out prominently, and tends to make the person markedly dissimilar in outline to commonplace humanity.” To the extent that antagonism calls forth our deeper, more forceful selves, it is central to the development of character and thus one of the desirable results of liberty.

75 OL, CW, 18:245.
77 OL, CW, 18:263–64.
78 Here, as elsewhere, Mill’s tone is close to Nietzsche’s. On the comparison, see Sinopoli, “Thick-Skinned Liberalism,” 614; Devigne, Reforming Liberalism, 182–85.
D. An Antagonistic Mill

There are three common interpretations of Mill’s thought that should be reconsidered in light of the discussion of experiential antagonism. The first attributes to Mill the view that liberty leads to a “marketplace of ideas,” a phrase that does not appear in his oeuvre. The market metaphor suggests that, in the liberal society Mill envisions, ideas will be weighed and traded like commodities. Flawed ideas will be weeded out, better ideas will thrive through more widespread adoption, and hybrid ideas will respond to what amounts to intellectual market forces.

While this interpretation accurately captures Mill’s insistence that beliefs should compete with their rivals, it misconstrues Mill’s epistemology and, therefore, his approach to ideological competition. Because his concern is as much with how beliefs are held, as with what beliefs are held, emphasizing the ease with which ideas are bought, tried, and sold transforms eccentricity into something more like flakiness. Beliefs are extensions of the self, intimately conceived and held with passion and force—they say everything about who we are. They are adopted and abandoned, not instrumentally, like the calculated profit-seeking of the stock trader, and not capriciously, like the art gallery window-shopper. Rather, they are laboriously, painfully negotiated according to impulse, desire, conscience, and social interaction. Mill recognized both the inaptitude of the marketplace view and the ease with which an appreciation of originality and eccentricity can become an empty gesture when he describes how “people think genius a fine thing if it enables a man to write an exciting poem or paint a picture. But in its true sense, that of originality in thought and action, though no one says that it is not a thing to be admired, nearly all, at heart, think that they can do very well without it.... Originality is the one thing which unoriginal minds cannot feel the use of.” The marketplace interpretation misses the depth and force with which beliefs should be held and, therefore, misses the experiential thrust of Mill’s call for ideological contestation.

The marketplace metaphor runs further aground when it leads to a second interpretation of Mill’s thought, what I will call the “progressive” interpretation. Scholars like Joseph Hamburger, Maurice Cowling, and Linda Raeder have argued, largely in response to his early writings, that Mill...
envisioned a final stage or method, an apex of human development, where mankind will converge around beliefs and ways of life that are objectively true.83 Taken broadly, Mill's progressivism is hard to deny—particularly when seen in light of his view of civilization's progress through history—but it is important to understand why it has limited explanatory power in regards to his view of ideological antagonism.84 First, the progressive interpretation wrongly suggests that Mill foresaw a point of ideological convergence, somewhere in the future, toward which open discussion, whether by market mechanisms or dialectical movement, was indelibly leading. Even if this notion of a final agreement seems to appear in Mill's early work, when his affiliation with the St. Simonians was strongest, it is absent from his later work, particularly On Liberty, where the central arguments cut against the notion that such a singularity is either possible or desirable. Indeed, Mill often argues that character-formation and truth-seeking—particularly as pursued through modes of antagonism—should drive us further apart, not closer together. Mill describes this experience in an early letter (1833) to Carlyle, in which he describes his slow realization of antagonism's benefits:

I have not any great notion of the advantage of what the "free discussion" men, call the "collision of opinions," it being my creed that Truth is sown and germinates in the mind itself, and is not to be struck out suddenly like fire from a flint by knocking another hard body against it: so I accustomed myself to learn by inducing others to deliver their thoughts, and to teach by scattering my own, and I eschewed occasions of controversy.... I still think I was right in the main, but I have carried both my doctrine and my practice much too far: and this I know by one of its consequences which I suppose would be an agreeable one to most men, viz. that most of those whom I at all esteem and respect, though they may know that I do not agree with them wholly, yet, I am afraid, think ... that I am considerably nearer to agreeing with them than I actually am.... I know that I have been wrong, by finding myself seated in the Gig much more firmly than I have any business as an honest man to be.... I am only about to have in all its fullness, that sincerity of speech for which you give me credit. I only had it thus far hitherto, that all I have ever spoken, by word of mouth or in writing, I have firmly believed, and have spoken it solely because it was my belief. Yet even that, in these days, was much, but not enough, seeing that it depends upon my own will to make it more.—The result of all which is that with you as well as with several others

83See n. 30 above; see also Cowling, Mill and Liberalism, and Duncan, Marx and Mill. Cowling, for example, writes that Mill can "be accused of more than a touch of something resembling moral totalitarianism. His emphasis on social cohesion and moral consensus at all periods of his life was of the greatest consequence" (xlviii). Mill's dream is "of creating a society which is morally homogeneous and intellectually healthy" (28).

84For Mill's historical progressivism, see especially his writings on India (CW, 30) and his famous 1836 essay, "Civilization" (CW, 28).
very unlike you, there will probably be a more frequent and free communication of dissent than has hitherto been, even though the consequence should be to be lowered in your opinion; that indeed if it were to be the result would be conclusive proof that I have been acting wrong hitherto, because it would shew that for being thought so highly of I had been partly indebted to not being thoroughly known—which I am sure is the case oftener than I like to think of.  

Note that, even though he here questions the “great notion … [of] the ‘collision of opinions,’” he would later use the word “collision” four times in chapter 2 of On Liberty, each time to describe the exchange of opinion.  

The emphasis on Mill’s progressivism further misinterprets his conception of ideological change. Rather than viewing the history of ideas as an unrelentingly upward movement where dead doctrines are destroyed or absorbed by ideas that prove more correct or persuasive, Mill frequently describes ideological change as a partially cyclical process in which doctrines run their course, temporarily recede, adapt to new conditions, and gradually reemerge with renewed potency. In a chapter of his Logic titled “Of the Requisite of a Philosophical Language,” for example, he describes at length the way in which ideas, after ceasing to “be kept up by the controversies which accompanied their first introduction,” tend to “degenerate into lifeless dogmas,” because “the human mind, in different generations, occupies itself with different things,” thereby making it “natural and inevitable that in every age a certain portion of our recorded and traditional knowledge, not being continually suggested by the pursuits and inquiries with which mankind are at that time engrossed, should fall asleep, as it were, and fade from the memory.” In this way, “there is a perpetual oscillation in spiritual truths…. [T]heir meaning is almost always in a process either of being lost or of being recovered.” Indeed, he warns against the “shallow conceptions” and “incautious proceedings” of “mere logicians” who, in misinterpreting a doctrine during its “downward period,” can unjustly narrow its meaning to that of mere “prejudice.” Disposing of old ideas is “a great evil,” for the “very inconsistency incurred by the coexistence of the formulas with philosophical opinions which seemed to condemn them as absurdities, operate[s] as a stimulus to the re-examination of the subject.”  

In On Liberty, Mill brings his thoughts on ideological “oscillation”—antagonistic in nature—to bear on freedom of action. While emphasizing the need for those “who introduce new things which did not before exist,” he also underlines the great need for those “who keep the life in those [things] which already existed,” and he warns of the day when “those who do the old things should forget why they are done, and do them like cattle, not

85 Mill, To Thomas Carlyle, 18th May 1833, CW, 12:153–54.
87 Mill, A System of Logic, CW, 8:681–84.
like human beings."\(^{88}\) The antagonism fostered by increased liberty of speech and action is, therefore, as much an act of preserving, adapting, and re-animating the past as it is an impetus for progress. This confirms the previous discussion on why even those doctrines that have been proven wrong retain great value as participants in antagonism. It reaffirms the idea that, for Mill, antagonism is to become a permanent feature of the social and political landscape. If doctrines became "merely traditional" from inactivity, then "such dead matter would not resist the smallest shock from anything really alive, and there would be no reason why civilization should not die out."\(^{89}\)

Finally, an antagonistic reading of Mill may go some way in reorienting debates over the nature of his individualism. While previous debates took place between, on the one hand, a libertarian, noninterference interpretation of Mill's liberalism that understands the harm principle as interested in establishing a sphere of negative liberty, and, on the other hand, a positive-liberty interpretation that views Mill's liberalism as rooted essentially in self-rule—what Nicholas Capaldi calls "freedom as autonomy, understood as self-discipline not mere self-assertion"—an antagonistic reading brings out the role of social context in the formation of individual character.\(^{90}\) This is not to say that "self-will" is not, ultimately, the primary agent in Mill's account of freedom. Rather, by emphasizing the importance of antagonism in Mill's thought, this interpretation captures the importance of other people in the individual's development—the importance of opponents, rivals, interlocutors, and of the ways character is ultimately "the expression of [one's] own nature, as it has been developed and modified by [one's] own culture."\(^{91}\) If it is true that Mill's ideal is something resembling individual autonomy—though he never himself used the word—then the antagonistic interpretation draws attention to the place of experiential antagonism in developing the kind of individual—original, forceful, authentic—capable of developing and expressing true character.

\(^{88}\)OL, CW, 18:267.

\(^{89}\)Ibid.


\(^{91}\)OL, CW, 18:264. For a thorough treatment of Mill's thoughts on intersubjectivity, see Zivi, "Cultivating Character."
Conclusion

Stanley Fish calls liberalism a theory for "antidisputants"—those "for whom the highest obligation is to transcend or set aside one's own sense of interest in favor of a common interest in mutual cooperation and egalitarian justice." The problem with liberal neutrality, according to Fish, is that it "displaces morality by asking you to inhabit your moral convictions loosely," or, in other words, that it "asks you to be morally thin." However, at least one prominent liberal—J. S. Mill—saw liberalism as the best means of cultivating moral thickness, and, in doing so, forcefully challenges the Fishian and agonistic idea that liberalism is by its very nature antipathetic to widespread social and political antagonism. By circumscribing a secure, loosely bounded space for moral antagonism, Mill placed the need to allow individuals to inhabit their moral convictions with verve and force at the center of the liberal agenda.

The liberal agenda, however, contains more than Mill's version of deep pluralism. To the extent that liberals are committed to peace and tolerance, for example, they are justifiably wary of widespread social and political antagonism. Liberalisms like Judith Shklar's "liberalism of fear" or Patrick Neal's "vulgar liberalism" are in this way essentially defensive theories. If liberalism, according to Shklar, properly seeks to secure as "first right" an absolute "protect[jion] against ... fear of cruelty," then enthusiasm for healthy, vibrant moral antagonism must be tempered always by considerations of potential harm. And though Mill's antagonistic liberalism, by placing coercion clearly off the table in situations of liberal antagonism, would seem to satisfy Shklar's basic concern for safety, it is not difficult to imagine ways in which even noncoercive exchanges can be characterized as cruel. As

92Fish, Trouble with Principle, 129.
93Ibid., 41.
94As one anonymous reviewer notes, Mill's appreciation for antagonism extended beyond liberal—noncoercive—settings. As several scholars have recently pointed out in regards to Mill's tenure in the East India Company and his writings on India, he condoned decidedly illiberal treatment of non-Western peoples in the name of progress and civilizational development. Likewise, the reviewer notes, Mill's views on the American Civil War mirrored in important ways those of Marx; for both men, the war was a dynamic moment in the progress of ideas. That said, the Harm Principle is what makes Mill's theory of antagonism properly liberal by constraining participants and thereby providing a setting of noncoercion for productive conflict. See on Mill's imperial sympathies, Jennifer Pitts, A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Uday S. Mehta, Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); but cf. Margaret Kohn and Daniel I. O'Neill, "A Tale of Two Indias: Burke and Mill on Empire and Slavery in the West Indies," Political Theory 34 (2006):192–228; Richard Boyd, "Imperial Fathers and Favorite Sons: J. S. Mill,
Jeremy Waldron points out, "a positive and healthy sign that the processes of ethical confrontation ... are actually taking place" is the clear presence of "widespread moral distress." Is it cruel to incur moral distress in others? The difference between the liberalism of fear and the liberalism of antagonism has much to do with the odds that one might answer this question in the affirmative.

Furthermore, because liberals are committed to reason as a regulative ideal of political discourse, they tend to be wary of the sort of antagonism Mill invokes here. This means circumventing situations of intractable disagreement, for example, by "prescinding" away from points of contention otherwise agreeing to "say nothing at all" and remove controversial matters from the public agenda. It means, too, precluding from situations of deliberation those moral positions that do not satisfy conditions of impartiality or reciprocity—that is, those positions which are not, at least to some degree, interchangeable in regards to those who hold them. Against strategies of circumvention, an antagonist in the mold of Mill would identify, explore, and push on precisely the points of disagreement between moral positions because these conflicts are viewed as opportunities for progress, rather than dangers to be avoided. Likewise, the antagonist questions the primacy of reciprocity, since antagonism has as much to do with how individuals form and hold beliefs—preferably, with force and verve—as it does with what individuals believe. To the extent that an individual's character is authentic or eccentric, its constitutive beliefs will be increasingly singular and, therefore, less amenable to conditions of reciprocity.

Mill's antagonistic liberalism matters, however, to whatever degree liberals are also committed to the idea that, as Shklar herself argues, "a diversity of


95On the limited space for passion in the discursive theories of Rawls and Habermas, see Sharon R. Krause, Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1–47.


97Fish calls this "what's-sauce-for-the-goose-is-sauce-for-the-gander" liberalism. Such a view, he argues, "requires that you redescribe your enemy as someone just like you." See Trouble With Principle, chap. 2. On the conditions of reciprocity and impartiality in democratic deliberation, see Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, Democracy and Disagreement (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 52–93.
opinions and habits is not only to be endured, but to be cherished and encouraged.\textsuperscript{98} Because liberalism cherishes pluralism, rather than merely tolerates it, proponents of defensive or rational liberalism must be aware of the damage to the prospects of a deep, rich pluralism that a one-eyed pursuit of peace or respect can cause. In other words, Mill's thoughts on antagonism suggest that liberalism's commitments to diversity and individual self-direction require citizens respect each other\textit{enough} to dispute, challenge, and otherwise antagonize divergent ways of life.