



THE RESTRICTION OF PLURALISM

Mortimer Adler

(1)

Pluralism, tolerance, and liberalism (the kind of liberalism that is doctrinaire) are twentieth-century terms that have a few antecedents in modern thought, especially in that of the nineteenth century, but they have none in antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The doctrinaire liberals of the twentieth century espouse pluralism and tolerance as if they were desirable values on which no restrictions or qualifications should be placed when they are applied to the life of society and of thought. They reveal thereby their lack of understanding of what should be for them a seminal and formative work, John Stuart Mill's great essay *On Liberty*, especially its chapter on freedom of thought and discussion.

Pluralism is a desirable policy in all realms of action and thought *except* those in which unity is required. When unity is required, pluralism must be restricted. For example, a stable and peaceful society cannot exist under the domination of two or more competing governments unless one is subordinate to the other. The structure of a federal government, such as that of the United States, with the major sovereignty being vested in the national government and

purely internal sovereignty being vested in the state governments, affords us with an example of restricted political pluralism that works effectively. Also, an effective and viable economy cannot be organized by competing and opposed economic principles. In the political realm, this does not exclude the pluralism of competing political parties; in the economic realm, it does not exclude the pluralism of competing entrepreneurial agencies. In both cases, the desirable pluralism is subordinate to a controlling unity.

It may seem odd to associate a choice between competing political parties, or the favoring of one or another entrepreneurial agency in the marketplace, with preference in matters of taste among diverse cuisines or styles of dress. However, wherever reasonable men can reasonably disagree, as they can about questions of political expediency or about economic options, their decision in favor of one or another alternative is a preference that closely resembles preferences in what are more obviously matters of taste.

(2)

In the sphere of all matters subject to individual thought and decision, pluralism is desirable and tolerable only in those areas that are matters of taste rather than matters of truth. Preferences with regard to cuisine, dress, patterns of dance, social manners, artistic styles, do not raise any questions of truth. Where that is the case, pluralism has always existed on earth, not only in different societies and cultures, but sometimes also within a single society or culture. When, within a single society or culture, the attempt is made to regiment the conduct of individuals with respect to matters of taste, that regimentation aims at a monolithic control of individual preferences and decisions.

The reaction against such monolithic or totalitarian regimentation is the motivating force of liberalism's spirited defense of toleration for diversity in all matters where individuals have a right to be free in expressing and acting on personal preference. Such matters belong in the sphere of the voluntary. But with regard to matters that belong in the sphere of intellect, matters involving truth not taste, a persistent pluralism is intolerable.

The mind of any one individual engaged in the pursuit of truth is necessitated in the judgments it makes by whatever mass of evidence or weight of reasons point in one direction rather than another. The affirmative judgment that this proposition (i.e., that at-

oms are fissionable) is true rather than the opposite is intellectually necessitated.

At that point, one cannot tolerate being open-minded about the excluded alternatives. But such intolerance is entirely a private matter. It does not call for the suppression of the false opinions that others may still hold. It does not call for any social or political action enforcing unanimity in the adoption of the truth. It does not call for witch-hunts, McCarthy tactics, or the burning of heretics. It calls only for continued discussion between individuals.

Some of the matters about which we are obliged to think and act are not matters of taste. Only with regard to matters of taste and public policy should individual freedom to differ be preserved and should recourse to voting be considered. There is another realm, concerned with questions of truth, in which unity is required and in which pluralism is out of place. In history, mathematics, science, and philosophy there is room for competing and conflicting theories, hypotheses, doctrines, or propositions, *only as long as no one of them is, at a given time, established as true.*

I stress the reference to a given time because the pursuit of truth is an ongoing process in which the judgment of what is true and false changes from time to time. This does not alter the fact that, *at a given time*, judgments concerning which of two or more competing alternatives is true are exclusionary judgments. For the time being, other alternatives are ruled out as false.

This applies to judgments about questions of value as well as to judgments about matters of fact. To view pluralism in regard to values as desirable and tolerable is tantamount to dismissing all value judgments as matters of taste rather than as matters of truth. If, however, the prescriptive judgments we make about how to conduct our lives and our communities—judgments that contain the word “ought”—can be true or false, then they are subject to the unity of truth, as much so as our judgments in mathematics and empirical science.

There is another way of assigning certain matters to the sphere of truth and certain matters to the sphere of taste. Anything that is transcultural is clearly in the sphere of truth. Anything that is not—*and should not be*—transcultural is in the sphere of taste. That leaves open questions about matters that at this juncture in history are not transcultural but, perhaps, should be.

There is no question that technology and its underlying mathematics and science are transcultural. There is no question about cuisine, style in dress, social manners, and the like. They are not transcultural and should not be. But what about philosophy? Religion?

Though at present philosophy is not transcultural, my understanding of the role of philosophy among the disciplines of learning leads me to think it should become transcultural. As I hope will become clear later, it can do so by passing the test of truth that consists in its being compatible with the knowledge available through the work of the empirical sciences.

Like philosophy, religion at the present is not transcultural, but that leaves quite open the question whether it should be. The answer to that question depends, in my judgment, on the relation of religion to philosophy, on the one hand, and to mythology, on the other.

(3)

I have used the words “tolerable” and “intolerable” in referring to matters where individual freedom of preference or decision should be allowed, as distinguished from those matters where the intellect, in its pursuit of truth, is obliged to try to overcome pluralism and to achieve unity.

In his chapter on freedom of thought and discussion, Mill is concerned with the pursuit of truth. With truth as the ultimate goal to be achieved, he advocates the toleration of competing doctrines and opinions so that, when all are fairly considered and submitted to arguments pro and con, the truth is more likely to be discovered.

Mill advocates the toleration of individuals who differ in thought and speech, but not tolerance for competing doctrines or opinions, as if they were all equally acceptable or preferable. He does not look upon pluralism with respect to matters of truth in the same way that he looks upon pluralism with respect to matters of taste. Readers should consult the note appended in order to understand how Mill’s views about liberty of thought and discussion are affected by his concern with the pursuit of truth.

So far I have not mentioned religion. For those who regard religion as not belonging to the realm of truth, there is no problem about pluralism any more than there is a problem about pluralism with regard to cuisine, dress, style, and so on. Only if, with regard to the

diversity of religions, there are questions about truth and falsehood do we have a problem about the pluralism of religions and the unity of truth.

That problem is not concerned with preserving religious liberty, freedom of worship, and the toleration, in a particular society or in the world, of a diversity of religious institutions, communities, practices, and beliefs. It is concerned only with the question of where, in that diversity, the truth lies if there is any truth in religion at all.

Note to Chapter I

Here are some crucial passages on liberty of thought and discussion in Chapter 2 of J. S. Mill's essay *On Liberty*.

But the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.

The highest aim and best result of improved intelligence, it has hitherto been thought, is to unite mankind more and more in the acknowledgment of all important truths; and does the intelligence only last as long as it has not achieved its object? Do the fruits of conquest perish by the very completeness of the victory?

I affirm no such thing. As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase: and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested. . . . But though this gradual narrowing of the bounds of diversity of opinion is necessary in both senses of the term, being at once inevitable and indispensable, we are not therefore obliged to conclude that all its consequences must be beneficial. The loss of so important an aid to the intelligent and living apprehension of a truth, as is afforded by the necessity of explaining it to, or defending it against, opponents, though not sufficient to outweigh, is no trifling drawback from, the benefit of its universal recognition. Where this advantage can no longer be

had, I confess I should like to see the teachers of mankind endeavouring to provide a substitute for it; some contrivance for making the difficulties of the question as present to the learner's consciousness, as if they were pressed upon him by a . . . [dissident] champion, eager for his conversion.


But instead of seeking contrivances for this purpose, they have lost those they formerly had. The Socratic dialectics, so magnificently exemplified in the dialogues of Plato, were a contrivance of this description. They were essentially a negative discussion of the great questions of philosophy and life, directed with consummate skill to the purpose of convincing any one who had merely adopted the commonplaces of received opinion that he did not understand the subject—that he as yet attached no definite meaning to the doctrines he professed; in order that, becoming aware of his ignorance, he might be put in the way to obtain a stable belief, resting on a clear apprehension both of the meaning of doctrines and of their evidence. The school disputations of the Middle Ages had a somewhat similar object. They were intended to make sure that the pupil understood his own opinion, and (by necessary correlation) the opinion opposed to it, and could enforce the grounds of the one and confute those of the other.

We have now recognised the necessity to the mental well-being of mankind (on which all their other well-being depends) of freedom of opinion, and freedom of the expression of opinion, on four distinct grounds; which we will now briefly recapitulate.

First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility.

Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied.

Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but fourthly, the meaning of the

doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience. 

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