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**JOHN STUART MILL'S VIEWS ON LIBERTY, CONTESTATION, AND  
INDIVIDUALITY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines John Stuart Mill's essay On Liberty and its implications for public administration. The paper discusses Mill's apprehensions regarding the tyranny of social opinion, his embrace of political and social contestation and of diverse forms of individual self-realization or autonomy, and his arguments for the dissemination of political and administrative power. It is argued that, whatever his intentions, Mill's arguments here appear to support a somewhat less elitist view of governance than is suggested in his other major political work, Considerations on Representative Government, and also that his recommendations for decentralization in public administration are consistent with American practices of administration.*

John Stuart Mill is one of those political thinkers whose ideas are more frequently cited than carefully examined within public administration. However, a notable exception here is Beth Warner's insightful analysis, over a decade ago, of Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*. Warner sees Mill here as seeking in this work "to balance the spirit of popular

government with governance by the most educated, skilled, and experienced of the nation, whether they were citizens, elected representatives, or administrative officials” (2001, 403). She argues that “Mill does not lead us toward democracy strictly speaking, but toward representative government with heavy doses of skill elites” and observes that “the fact that we are not so far from the latter in the United States suggests that Mill's articulations may be helpful and suggestive to us” (411). This paper seeks to build on Warner’s analysis by examining Mill’s essay *On Liberty*. The paper will discuss Mill’s apprehensions expressed here regarding the intimidating effect or “tyranny” of social opinion, his embrace of political and social contestation and of diverse forms of individual self-realization or autonomy, as well as his arguments for the dissemination of political and administrative power. It is argued that, whatever his intentions, Mill’s arguments here appear to support a somewhat less elitist view of governance than is expressed perhaps in *Considerations* and, moreover, that his recommendations for decentralization in public administration are consistent with American practices of administration.

### **ON THE TYRANNY OF “PREVAILING SOCIAL OPINION”**

Like many liberal theorists, both before and after him, Mill was concerned about the tyranny of the majority. Unlike most of these theorists, however, Mill was concerned not only with the power that a legislative majority can exercise over a minority through law, but also with the power that prevailing social opinion in society can exercise over the opinions of citizens, what he terms the “moral coercion of public opinion” (1988, 78). As Mill states the matter, “when society is itself the tyrant--society collectively, over the separate individuals who compose it--its means of tyrannizing are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands

of its political functionaries” (73). Rather “society can and does execute its own mandates: and if it issues wrong mandates instead of right, or any mandates at all in things with which it ought not to meddle, it practises a social tyranny more formidable than many kinds of political oppression” (73). This is because, when compared with any tyranny exercised by public authorities, this type of social tyranny, “though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties,” offers “fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself” (73). For Mill, it follows, therefore, that protection of citizens “against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough” (79). In his view, “there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them” and “to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own” (73).

In considering how best to protect humankind from the tyranny of social opinion, as well as government tyranny, Mill asserts here the importance of what he terms “one very simple principle” (78). This principle is that “the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant” (78). To implement this principle effectively, Mill argues there must be, among other things, “liberty of conscience, in the most comprehensive sense: liberty of thought and feeling: absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects, practical or speculative, scientific, moral, or theological” (80). Furthermore,

there must be, as he puts it, “liberty of tastes and pursuits: of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character: of doing as we like, subject to such consequences as may follow: without impediment from our fellow-creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong” (81). Mill sees these liberties as necessary to protect what he terms “the only freedom which deserves the name,” namely that of “pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it” (81).

### **MILL’S EMBRACE OF ANTAGONISTIC CONTESTATION**

It is because of what he views as the tyranny of prevailing social opinion that Mill attaches considerable importance to liberty of thought as well as of discussion. Mill sees constant contestation of opinions as crucial for productive human discourse and the preservation of liberty. It is crucial, according to Mill, in part, because it is only through the constant contestation of our opinions that we can begin to sort out what we believe to be true from what we believe to be false. He notes that “complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right (87). As he puts it, “the steady habit of correcting and completing one’s own opinion by collating it with those of others ... is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it” (88). To feel justified in his beliefs on any subject, a person must, in his view, therefore, be “cognisant of all that can, at least obviously, be said against him,” look for “objections and difficulties, instead of avoiding them,” and “shut out no light which can be thrown upon the subject from any quarter” (89). To support his point here, Mill observes that the “Roman Catholic Church, even at the

canonization of a saint, admits, and listens patiently to a ‘devil's advocate.’ The holiest of men. it appears, cannot be admitted to posthumous honours, until all that the devil could say against him is known and weighed” (89).

For Mill, this constant contestation of our beliefs against beliefs that contradict them is the best that we can hope for when deciding what exactly it is that we ought or ought not to believe. As he argues, “the beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded” because “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” (89). The foregoing may paint a picture of human beings as somehow converging through a process of antagonistic argument toward greater enlightenment and truth. In other words, liberty of opinion and discussion appear as simply instrumental towards the pursuit of some type of objective truth. There is certainly ample evidence that Mill entertained such a view. He observes, for example, how “wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument” (88) and how the silencing of dissent robs us of “the opportunity of exchanging error for truth” and of a “clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error” (85).

However, notwithstanding Mill’s belief that contestation is instrumental to the pursuit of truth, Mill presents a somewhat nuanced view of the nature of truth itself and our ability to determine it. He observes how “truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites, that ... it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners” (115). This is why, as he notes, in politics,

It is almost a commonplace, that a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life; until the one or the other shall have so enlarged its mental grasp as to be a party equally of order and of progress, knowing and distinguishing what is fit to be preserved from what ought to be swept away. Each of these modes of thinking derives its utility from the deficiencies of the other; but it is in a great measure the opposition of the other that keeps each within the limits of reason and sanity (115).

In Mill's view, "on every subject on which difference of opinion is possible, the truth depends on a balance to be struck between two sets of conflicting reasons" (104). This is especially so in subjects of "morals, religion, politics, social relations, and the business of life" where "three-fourths of the arguments for every disputed opinion consist in dispelling the appearances which favour some opinion different from it" (104).

Furthermore, consistent with the above, Mill frequently emphasizes the limitations or fallibility of human judgment noting how in exposing our beliefs to constant contestation, "we have done the best that the existing state of human reason admits of" and that such an approach offers the "sole way" of attaining "the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being" (89). Mill observes that "mankind are not infallible" and "their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths" so that a "unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good, until mankind are much more capable than at present of recognizing all sides of the truth" (124). As George Mousourakis

argues, for Mill, therefore, “human knowledge is always fallible and always incomplete” so that “we can never claim certainty for any theory or doctrine” (2013, 387).

Truth, for Mill, therefore, is what emerges as a result of vigorous contestation and, so long as humans are fallible, it must always be provisional. Moreover, Mill sees constant contestation of opinion as important not simply because it can permit the discovery of truths and correction of errors. This becomes evident where Mill considers the argument for liberty of opinion and discussion even in cases where the prevailing social opinion, in fact, turns out to be correct or true and the challenges to it are, in fact, in error. Mill’s argument here is significant, since, after all, we might reasonably ask, particularly given human fallibility, why, having finally determined what is in fact true, in a particular case, we should then risk losing this truth and courting error by listening to the erroneous arguments of our opponents. Mill’s response is that what we believe to be true, even if true in itself, “if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth” (102-103). In the absence of contestation, such a belief

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 ... 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 (120-121).



In other words, for Mill, the discovery and even widespread acceptance of a truth is not enough because why we believe something to be true is just as important as what we believe to be true. In this regard, it is interesting to note that, whereas Mill certainly anticipates that “as mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase” and that, as a result, there will be a “gradual narrowing of the bounds of diversity of opinion,” Mill argues, nonetheless, that “we are not therefore obliged to conclude that all its consequences must be beneficial” (111-112). In particular, Mill worries that, where a true belief has become universally accepted as such and as no longer controversial, we risk losing “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” (112).

In order to avoid this loss of contestation of what we already know to true, Mill goes so far as to suggest that, “if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them, and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skilful devil's advocate can conjure up” (104). To this end, he argues that he should like to see “teachers of mankind endeavouring to provide ... 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 dissentient champion, eager for his conversion” (111-112). This is because, for Mill, “no one's opinions deserve the name of knowledge, except so far as he has either had forced upon him by others, or gone through of himself, the same mental process which would have been required of him in carrying on an active controversy with opponents” (113). Constant contestation of any “received opinion” is necessary not only for the “certainty,” but also for, as he puts it, the “vitality of our convictions” (113).

## THE PROMOTION OF INDIVIDUALITY

Mill's emphasis on the importance not only of what we believe to be true, but also of why or how we believe it to be true, is connected closely to his views on individuality. Mill saw the contestation of our beliefs, even our true beliefs, as essential in and of itself to our full development as individual and free human beings. Mill's views on the connection between contestation and the shaping and development of human beings is shown in his emphasis, as noted above, on the need for an "intelligent and living apprehension of a truth" and in his observation that contestation of our beliefs, even our true beliefs, has a "vital effect" on "character and conduct." In other words, Mill sees the benefits of contestation of our beliefs in not simply epistemic terms, but also in moral terms. As he observes, "freedom of opinion and freedom of the expression of opinion" are necessary to the "mental well-being of mankind" (120) and, without such freedom, there are "baneful consequences ... to the moral nature of man" (123). For Mill, as Brandon Turner has argued, then, "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," but "more important, it is critical in producing reflective, autonomous individuals" (2010, 40).

Mill seeks liberty of thought and discussion, as well as action, as a crucial counterweight to what he sees, as noted earlier, as the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling" that he views as hindering the development and formation of individuality. He is concerned that, in his time, "individual spontaneity is hardly recognised by the common modes of thinking, as having any intrinsic worth, or deserving any regard on its own account" and that the "majority, being satisfied with the ways of mankind as they now are ... cannot comprehend why those ways

should not be good enough for everybody” (1988, 124-125). Furthermore, as he notes, “spontaneity forms no part of the ideal of the majority of moral and social reformers, but is rather looked on with jealousy, as a troublesome and perhaps rebellious obstruction to the general acceptance of what these reformers, in their own judgment, think would be best for mankind” (124-125).

Mill worries that there is “at present a strong tendency” to a “narrow theory of life, and to the pinched and hidebound type of human character which it patronizes” (130). As he sees it, “society has now fairly got the better of individuality; and the danger which threatens human nature is not the excess, but the deficiency, of personal impulses and preferences” (128-129). He notes how

In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves-- what do I prefer? or, what would suit my character and disposition? or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? what is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? (129)

As a result, in Mill’s view, ‘the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally

with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature, they have no nature to follow” (129).

Mill positively celebrates here individual eccentricity, arguing that it “has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage which it contained” (135). For him, the fact that “so few now dare to be eccentric, marks the chief danger of the time. (135). Troubled by social reform movements in his day pressing for the “moral and prudential improvement of our fellow creatures,” he writes that the

Tendencies of the times cause the public to be more disposed than at most former periods to prescribe general rules of conduct, and endeavour to make every one conform to the approved standard. And that standard, express or tacit, is to desire nothing strongly. Its 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 (137-138).

Against these pressures, Mill argues that “it is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation” (130). Furthermore, in his view, as the actions and works of human beings “partake the character of those who do them . . . human life also becomes rich, diversified, and animating, furnishing more abundant aliment to high thoughts and elevating feelings, and strengthening the tie which binds every individual to the race, by making the race infinitely better worth belonging to” (130-131).

Mill, then, argues for liberty of thought and discussion and the vigorous, ongoing contestation it brings with it, as well as liberty of action, as a means of checking the deadening effects of prevailing social opinion on the development of human character and of, thereby, helping men and women towards a greater degree of self-realization. However, it is important to emphasize that, for Mill, the form that such self-realization takes can never be the same for all individuals and must, at least for the foreseeable future, remain intrinsically pluralistic in nature. As noted above, Mill believes that we should have the liberty of “framing the plan of our life to suit our own character” and of “pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it” (81). He believes that “while mankind are imperfect ... there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them” (124). From Mill’s perspective, it is not only “our understanding” but also “our desires and impulses” that should be “our own” (127). He argues that

The same things which are helps to one person towards the cultivation of his higher nature, are hindrances to another. The same mode of life is a healthy excitement to one, keeping all his faculties of action and enjoyment in their best order, while to another it is a distracting burthen, which suspends or crushes all internal life. Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities of pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral agencies, that unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of

happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and aesthetic stature of which their nature is capable (136).

Mill makes clear that the fact that liberty may promote diverse forms of self-realization means that such liberty may, at times, be at odds with the search by reformers for improvements in the human condition. This is because, as he notes, “the spirit of improvement is not always a spirit of liberty, for it may aim at forcing improvements on an unwilling people; and the spirit of liberty, in so far as it resists such attempts, may ally itself locally and temporarily with the opponents of improvement” (138). However, for Mill, “the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement is liberty, since by it there are as many possible independent centres of improvement as there are individuals” (138).

Furthermore, as he writes with some urgency, “if the claims of Individuality are ever to be asserted, the time is now, while much is still wanting to complete the enforced assimilation” because “it is only in the earlier stages that any stand can be successfully made against the encroachment” (142). He worries that “if resistance waits till life is reduced *nearly* to one uniform type, all deviations from that type will come to be considered impious, immoral, even monstrous and contrary to nature” and “mankind speedily become unable to conceive diversity, when they have been for some time unaccustomed to see it” (142). As Gray has argued, then,

Mill saw progress, not in terms of the mass manufacture of any one type of human being, but as the promotion of the growth of the powers and capacities of autonomous thought and action. It is the growth of these powers which allows the cultivation of diverse

excellences or forms of self-development, elevates the character of human wants, and fosters cultural and social development in ‘innumerable divergent directions’ by facilitating ‘experiments of living’ (2003, 85).

Moreover, while it cannot be denied that Mill often expresses elitist views, far from calling for, to use Warner’s words, “heavy doses of skill elites,” Mill emphasizes in *On Liberty* the fact that is not only “persons of decided mental superiority who have a just claim to carry on their lives in their own way. There is no reason that all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns” (1988, 135). Rather, as he argues, “if a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode” (135).

In this regard, in his emphasis on the desirability of a diversity of different opinions and of “different modes of life” and on the need for individuals to make their own choices, including choices among these modes of life, while it would probably go too far to call Mill a value pluralist, nonetheless, his arguments for liberty of thought, discussion and action, as Isaiah Berlin (1969) has observed, chime well with those often advanced by value pluralists. In fact, Berlin argues that

[Mill’s] argument is plausible only on the assumption which, whether he knew it or not, Mill all too obviously made, that human knowledge was in principle never complete, and always fallible; that there was no single, universally visible, truth; that each man, each nation, each civilisation might take its own road towards its own goal, not necessarily harmonious with those of others; that men are altered, and the truths in which they

believe are altered, by new experiences and their own actions--what he calls 'experiments in living;' that consequently the conviction ... that there exists a basic knowable human nature one and the same, at all times, in all places, in all men ... is mistaken; and so, too, is the notion that is bound up with it, of a single true doctrine carrying salvation to all men everywhere (1969, 188).

### **DECENTRALIZED PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

As Gray argues, therefore, Mill accepts the "permanent necessity ... of the widest sphere of liberty for antagonistic modes of thought and diverse experiments in living" (1995, 122-123), In the last pages of *On Liberty*, Mill draws on his arguments regarding liberty, contestation, individuality, and diversity, discussed above, to develop a critique of centralized government and bureaucracy and also to offer a vision for a local and decentralized form of public administration. Despite his socialist sympathies, he warns here against adding unnecessarily to the power of central government arguing that

If the roads, the railways, the banks, the insurance offices, the great joint-stock companies, the universities, and the public charities, were all of them branches of the government: if, in addition, the municipal corporations and local boards, with all that now devolves on them, became departments of the central administration; if the employees of all these different enterprises were appointed and paid by the government, and looked to the government for every rise in life; not all the freedom of the press and popular constitution of the legislature would make this or any other country free otherwise than in name. And the evil would be greater, the more efficiently and scientifically the



administrative machinery was constructed--the more skilful the arrangements for obtaining the best qualified hands and heads with which to work it (1988, 180).

Furthermore, Mill offers a critique of bureaucracy that is strikingly similar to that offered by Max Weber some half century or so later, observing that, in countries such as Russia,

Where everything is done through the bureaucracy, nothing to which the bureaucracy is really adverse can be done at all. The constitution of such countries is an organization of the experience and practical ability of the nation, into a disciplined body for the purpose of governing the rest; and the more perfect that organization is in itself, the more successful in drawing to itself and educating for itself the persons of greatest capacity from all ranks of the community, the more complete is the bondage of all, the members of the bureaucracy included (182).

Mill, as did Weber, certainly understood that bureaucracy and the application of expertise could enhance technical efficiency but he also understood that

the absorption of all the principal ability of the country into the governing body is fatal, sooner or later, to the mental activity and progressiveness of the body itself. Banded together as they are--working a system which, like all systems, necessarily proceeds in a great measure by fixed rules--the official body are under the constant temptation of sinking into indolent routine, or, if they now and then desert that mill-horse round, of

rushing into some half-examined crudity which has struck the fancy of some leading member of the corps (182).

Mill's remedy for this problem was that, in the administration of government, there should be the "greatest dissemination of power consistent with efficiency; but the greatest possible centralization of information, and diffusion of it from the centre" (183). As opposed to a powerful centralized bureaucracy, Mill, drawing on examples from municipal administration in the New England states, as well as the administration of the Poor Laws in Britain, argues for a decentralized and local system of public administration and service delivery, in which a central government body or organization would offer information and advice to local units of government and make sure such units comply with general laws but, in all other matters, would leave local officials "to their own judgment, under responsibility to their constituents" (184). Such a central body would draw from "the variety of information and experience derived from the conduct of that branch of public business in all the localities, from everything analogous which is done in foreign countries, and from the general principles of political science" and make sure that "the knowledge acquired in one place" be available for others (183).

In Mill's view, this type of "central organ of information and instruction for all the localities would be equally valuable in all departments of administration" (184). This is because, as Mill sees it, "a government cannot have too much of the kind of activity which does not impede, but aids and stimulates, individual exertion and development" (1984). As R.J. Halliday has noted, therefore, "for Mill, there was no question of an elite organized as a separate ruling group or party controlling opinion and demanding deference from the non-elite ... The elite,

whatever its composition, was primarily a means of persuasion or education, either institutionalized in government, or active within society” (1970, 476).

As Mill warns, “the mischief begins when, instead of calling forth the activity and powers of individuals and bodies,” a centralized authority “substitutes its own activity for theirs; when, instead of informing, advising, and, upon occasion, denouncing, it makes them work in fetters, or bids them stand aside and does their work instead of them” (184-185). Mill sees decentralization of power in general, both to locally elected governments and voluntary groups and associations “as a means” of promoting the “mental education” of citizens, “a mode of strengthening their active faculties” and as fostering “individuality of development, and diversity of modes of action” (181). For this reason, notwithstanding the fact that, as he notes, “in many cases, ... individuals may not do the particular thing so well, on the average, as the officers of government, it is nevertheless desirable that it should be done by them” (179). Furthermore, such decentralization of power is desirable to check bureaucracy and protect individual liberty because, because where a people are “accustomed to transact their own business,” such a people will “never let itself be enslaved by any man or body of men because they are able to seize and pull the reins of the central administration” (181-182).

Some may object here that a decentralized form of public administration, as advocated by Mill, might constitute a barrier to the effective and efficient implementation of the democratically expressed popular will. However, Mill was very wary of what he termed the “ascendancy of public opinion in the State” (142). He worried that

As the various social eminences which enabled persons entrenched on them to disregard the opinion of the multitude, gradually become levelled; as the very idea of resisting the will of the public, when it is positively known that they have a will, disappears more and more from the minds of practical politicians; there ceases to be any social support for nonconformity--any substantive power in society, which, itself opposed to the ascendancy of numbers, is interested in taking under its protection opinions and tendencies at variance with those of the public (142).

One reason that Mill wished to decentralize power was that he understood, as did De Tocqueville, that a centralized democracy would not necessarily foster the freedom, contestation, individuality, and diversity that he prized.

## CONCLUSION

In concluding this paper, it should be noted here that, in *On Liberty*, Mill presents many arguments that are also included in his slightly later work, *Considerations on Representative Government*. However, in this latter work, it is notable that these arguments are presented in a more qualified, as well as often somewhat more elitist, manner. For example, in discussing the role of local government, Mills observes in *Considerations* that “the local representative bodies and their officers are almost certain to be of a much lower grade of intelligence and knowledge, than Parliament and the national executive” and that “besides being themselves of inferior qualifications, they are watched by, and accountable to, an inferior public opinion” (387), reservations that he notably chooses not to emphasize in his argument in *On Liberty*.

Moreover, notwithstanding Mill's promotion of open and antagonistic argument in *On Liberty*, Mill, in his advocacy of plural voting for elites in *Considerations*, argues that "it is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge" and that it is for the citizen's own "good that he should think that every one is entitled to some influence, but the better and wiser to more than others" (313). In this regard, in my view, George Arneson may well be correct when he argues that there is a paternalism in *Considerations* that is "incompatible with the antipaternalism of *On Liberty*" (1982, 55). Furthermore, consistent with this paternalism, it is notable that Mill's critique of bureaucracy is significantly more qualified in *Considerations* as when he notes that "freedom cannot produce its best effects, and often breaks down altogether, unless means can be found of combining it with trained and skilled administration" and that "no progress at all can be made towards obtaining a skilled democracy, unless the democracy are willing that the work which requires skill should be done by those who possess it" (1988, 267).

One of the reasons for the differences in emphasis or tone between these essays may well be, as has often been remarked, that Mill was influenced by a variety of conflicting intellectual traditions, including positivism, utilitarianism, idealism, and romanticism, as well as liberalism, and that, as a result, he was not himself always entirely consistent in his own views (Gray, 1979). Gray observes, for instance, that there is a "self-critical and open-minded eclecticism" in Mill's thought that "has led many commentators ... to despair of finding any coherent view in his writings" (1979, 34). As Gray puts it, "Mill never succeeded in welding the diverse intellectual traditions by which he was influenced into an integrated system" (34). Berlin has noted similarly here "the lack of logical cogency" (1969, 174) in Mill's thought and that "rigour in argument is not among his accomplishments" (189). In this regard, it can be argued, perhaps, that Mill's own

mind was itself a site for precisely the type of open-mindedness and agonistic contestation that he longed for in the Victorian society in which he lived.

Nevertheless, whatever inconsistencies may exist in Mill's ideas, in my view, Mill's vision of a decentralized and localized form of public administration is one that coheres quite well with his views on the need to protect and promote liberty, individuality, and diversity, as well as the contestation that fosters these. It is also a vision, as I have argued elsewhere, that is consistent with our American traditional practices of public administration (Spicer 2001). While, of course, government bureaucracy has certainly grown dramatically since the nineteenth century, local elected and appointed officials still continue to play an important role in administering the policies of state governments within the United States. The same is also true in regard to the role of state and local officials in administering the policies and programs of the federal government.

Obviously, arguments for administrative decentralization are by no means new to our field. However, it is important to note that Mill argues for decentralization on political rather than efficiency grounds, namely that, when compared with centralized bureaucracy, such decentralization helps to protect liberty, individuality, and diversity. In contrast, modern writers in public administration are often much more inclined to follow the example of Herbert Simon, who, in discussing the advantages of decentralization, argues that the "two principal pulls" for administrative decentralization are "the fact that a very large portion of the information that is relevant to decisions originates at the operating level" and "that the separation of decision from action increases the time and man-power costs of making and transmitting decisions" (1976, p. 157). Simon's argument, like that of many mainstream writers, focuses our attention here on what are essentially managerial and economic arguments for administrative decentralization, but

makes no mention at all of the political advantages of decentralization that are emphasized by Mill.

Undoubtedly, when compared with more centralized administrative systems found in Europe and elsewhere, our decentralized system of public administration, as critics in our own field, have pointed out, suffers from an abundance of inconsistencies, contestation, inefficiencies, and even inequities. However, notwithstanding these defect, such a system may well be preferable to the alternative. As Mill observes, in the concluding paragraph of his essay,

The worth of a State, in the long run, is the worth of the individuals composing it; and a State which postpones the interests of *their* mental expansion and elevation, to a little more of administrative skill, or of that semblance of it which practice gives, in the details of business; a State which dwarfs its men, in order that they may be more docile instruments in its hands even for beneficial purposes--will find that with small men no great thing can really be accomplished; and that the perfection of machinery to which it has sacrificed everything, will in the end avail it nothing, for want of the vital power which, in order that the machine might work more smoothly, it has preferred to banish (185).

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