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# THE NOISY CONFLICT OF HALF-TRUTHS

By Doris C. Meyers

THE CENTURY CLUB
ILLINOIS WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY
Bloomington, Illinois

*Address by Associate Professor Doris C. Meyers*
*on the occasion of the*
*Century Club Dinner*
*held on May 7, 1971*
*Memorial Center*
*Illinois Wesleyan University*

*Mrs. Meyers had been chosen by the faculty,*
*students and administration as recipient of the*
*Century Club Award for 1971*

## INTRODUCTION

During this past year I have been working on some aspects of the thought of the English nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill. When my husband and I were in London last January we visited the National Portrait Gallery and while there looked for Mill's portrait. We did not find him among either English philosophers or English literary men (though he qualified for both groups); instead he had been placed among the few who were categorized as "prophets." This classification is not at all far-fetched. The far-ranging scope of his concerns and their relevance to most of our contemporary concerns is striking. The great bulk of his writing, particularly his essays, periodical articles, and such books as *Three Essays on Religion, On Liberty,* and *The Subjection of Women,* has an astonishing immediacy. At a time when the word "relevant" is most often misused as a synonym for "contemporary," I would like to examine with you some of his words both in their relation to the history of an attitude and for their pertinence today. My title "The Noisy Conflict of Half-Truths" is a quotation from Mill's essay on Coleridge. It indicates both my theme and one of Mill's most persistent concerns: the complex nature of truth and the necessity of a reasoned dialectic in our attempts to reach truth.

# THE NOISY CONFLICT OF HALF-TRUTHS

By Doris C. Meyers

"Antagonistic modes of thought [are] as necessary to one another in speculation, as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution," wrote John Stuart Mill in his essays on two apparently irreconcilable thinkers, Jeremy Bentham and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Mill called them "the two great seminal minds of England in their age," and believed that the combination of these two "half-men" and their opposed ideas would have constituted something very near to the whole truth of the nineteenth century in England. For Mill, the truth inherent in any single point of view can only be properly estimated when it has infiltrated into minds of very different convictions—"when the noisy conflict of half-truths has subsided, and ideas which seemed mutually incompatible have been found only to require mutual limitations." Actually, Mill asserted, Bentham and Coleridge "were connected by two of the closest bonds of association—resemblance and contrast," and "all that is positive in the opinion of either of them is true."[1]

Mill's conviction that the only possible approach to truth is a dialectical one is grounded in his philosophy of history and on the laws of social progress which he believed are to be discovered in the movements of history. He believed that the single most

significant factor causing social and historical change is the ability of man to speculate and the nature of man's opinions and beliefs. In the sixth book of his *Logic* he wrote:

> Every considerable advance in material civilization has been preceded by an advance in knowledge, and when any great social change has come to pass, either in the way of gradual development or of sudden conflict, it has had for its precursor a great change in the opinion and modes of thinking of society.

Mill did not, as did Aristotle, proceed on the assumption that "all men by nature desire to know." In fact he recognized that such curious and inquring men are woefully few. In an early series of articles which he called "The Spirit of the Age," he developed the theory that history is essentially an alternation of two sorts of epochs, "Natural" and "Transitional." A natural (or "Organic") period is one of comparative calm and settled conviction, in which the men who hold power tend to be those who are best equipped to rule and there is a general unanimity of outlook and belief. The age of transition is—as its name implies—an uneasy yet necessary period of change. Mill's own time, he believed, was "pregnant with change." Such a time is distinguished by a wider diffusion of superficial knowledge without the necessary balance of wise authorities whose influence unites profound knowledge with the power to disseminate it. The state of public opinion in such a time is chaotic, says Mill, and "the young are ready to advertise for opinions." It is true that the settled order of the "natural" period sometimes gives rise to a confidence in itself which is both blind and unfounded; but a time of transition is one of "suspicion and distrust"—of intellectual confusion when, as the poet Yeats wrote of a more recent period of chaos and change:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.[2]

One of the unhappiest consequences of such a time is the dogmatic divisions among men, the major division being between what

Mill called "men of the past," to whom the manifestations of the times are cause for terror and revulsion, and "men of the present," for whom they are a "subject of exaltation—*new* men who insist upon being governed in a new way."[3] This division is frequently identical with the gap between the generations—though this is not necessarily the case. In such a time old opinions are discarded but no new ones which can win any sort of unanimous consent are established. Such a state is "at best one of convalescence rather than of health," says Mill. The gradual recovery of health implied in the word *convalescence* is manifested, he believed, in the erosion of old and entrenched prejudices at such a time through an increase of the discussion of ideas—of the dialectical examination of different viewpoints.

Unlimited discussion is the cornerstone of Mill's theory of truth and progress; yet he was fully aware of its dangers and pitfalls. He knew that to discuss means to question established opinions. He knew that the discovery of new truths is not nearly "so certain a consequence" of discussion as is the discovery of error, and that "the moment and the mood of mind in which men break loose from an error is not . . . the most favorable to those mental processes which are necessary to the investigation of truth." What causes error in the first place, he believed, is our rooted "incapacity for seeing more than one thing at a time," and when we break with the old habits of thought we do not necessarily lose this habit of onesided dogmatism. Mill wrote in *The Spirit of the Age* that

> Whether men adhere to old opinions or adopt new ones, 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 anyone who brings them the other half, as if he were attempting to deprive them of the portion which they have.[4]

There is no more persistent theme throughout Mill's writings than the conviction that truth is complex and manifold and must never be without the stimulus of a polar opposition if it wishes to survive. He wrote in *On Liberty* that

> Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, 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 . . . without the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners.[5]

This dialectical cast of mind which recognizes the contradictions at the heart of things and realizes the necessity, in Mill's words, for the "reconciling and combining of opposites," has a long history. Just as the men of transitional eras are divided between "old" and "new," so men throughout history have been divided between those who are uncomfortable without an either/or or a nothing/but approach to truth, and those who are able to accept the necessary tension of the both/and.

Mill based his dialectical approach to practical truth on what he believed to be the laws of historical change, while others have built upon their metaphysical conceptions of the nature of the universe. Foremost among these last is Heracleitus, who lived in the fifth century B.C. The fragments which remain to us of his cryptic utterances have had an influence out of proportion to their length. The persistent philosophical dilemma of the one versus the many, of whether there is cosmic unity underneath the confusion of multiplicity, found a creative reconciliation in the teachings of this Pre-Socratic philosopher. For Heracleitus, as for many more recent thinkers, the universe is better understood as a process of becoming rather than as a state of being, as in constant change and flux instead of remaining within fixed categories. Yet underneath the tension and interplay, the alternation and exchange of opposites, Heracleitus asserted, there exists the physical unity of cosmic fire, "kindled in measure and quenched in measure," and the spiritual unity of the Divine Mind or *Logos*. "From things that differ comes the most beautiful harmony," he wrote; and again, "That which differs with itself is in agreement; harmony consists of opposing tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre."[6]

The early nineteenth century philosopher Hegel was profoundly influenced by Heracleitus, and like him believed that the clashing interaction of opposites are united within the Divine. Hegel

thought that the inevitable "accidents" of human experience are to be conceived of in terms of the "Divine Idea working itself out through history." But Mill once confessed that he "became nauseated" whenever he read Hegel; and certainly there is a broad divergence of spirit between Hegel's arbitrary resolution of conflicts within the limits of a single fixed system and Mill's insistence on the necessity of a continuing live and open-ended dialectic.

Another great thinker who fully realized the tension of opposites was Goethe. It was from Kant's scientific writings, he said, that

> I grasped the idea that attraction and repulsion are essential constituents of matter and that neither can be divorced from the other in the concept of matter. This led me to the recognition of polarity as a basic feature of all creation.

And later he wrote, "They say that given two diametrically opposed opinions, the truth lies midway between them. *Not at all!* It is the *problem* that lies between them—life eternally active but mistakenly conceived as at rest."[7] This statement of Goethe's provides an essential warning to counteract those who tend to simplify contradiction by recourse to compromise. The purely quantitative middle position, as Aristotle points out in his *Ethics,* can actually be *less* true than one of the extremes on either side. The "golden mean" is not a quantitative one.

Goethe was a major influence on the thinking of the German novelist Thomas Mann. A view of reality as infinitely rich and complex and of truth as many-sided is a theme in all of Mann's novels, but particularly in *The Magic Mountain.* In the climactic "Snow" chapter of that novel, he writes that "man is the lord of counter-positions."

Persistent inquiry, an attitude of toleration, and discussion between adherents of different viewpoints, then, is the necessary means, according to Mill, for the attainment of vital and necessary truths. In his book *On Liberty* he deals with what he calls "the real morality of public discussion." He believed that one of the most essential prerequisites for becoming a philosopher is intellectual receptivity—the ability to learn from other minds. (It was

Bentham's inability to thus learn that caused Mill to refer to him as a "one-eyed" man.) Mill believed that verdicts of opinion should be determined by individual circumstances, and that anyone who displays "a want of candor, malignity, bigotry, or any intolerance of feeling" should be condemned. Equally, anyone should be honored—on whichever side—who has the "calmness to see and honesty to state what his opponents and their opinions really are—suggesting nothing to their discredit, keeping nothing back which tells . . . in their favor." It is especially important that the proponent of a particular viewpoint, he said, should "listen to all that is said against him—profiting by the part that is just and expounding the fallacy of what is not."[8]

Even such ideal discourse is beset with some real dangers, Mill realized. Dispassion and open-mindedness can easily become an uncritical subjectivism. In times of transition, especially, men are apt to rely indiscriminately on private judgment. Uninformed men, unable to understand and appreciate an argument, tend to blame the argument rather than themselves. "Truth, they think, is under a peremptory obligation of being intelligible to *them.*" One of the reasons that in such times personal judgments are preferred to those of authority is that the many divisions among the authorities cause the uninstructed to lose faith in them. Then it is that the "amateur of ideas," with unbounded confidence in his own opinions, however crude and unreasonable they may be, feels justified in rejecting the qualified person as a mere "theorist." "And that word," writes Mill, "which expresses the highest and noblest effort of human intelligence is turned into a byword of derision."[9] (I need not cite chapter and verse here from the mass of recent anti-intellectual and anti-academic pronouncements in order for you to recognize the modern parallels. Everyone from Timothy Leary to Martha Mitchell has had his say as the accepted oracle of our time.)

Another cause for the rejection of reasoned truth is the tendency to equate reliable judgment with something loosely called "commonsense." Mill, like Aristotle, believed firmly in the authority of cumulative human experience; but one must always make sure, he says, "that the conclusions of commonsense are confirmed by accurate knowledge."

Then there is the danger that the "half-instructed"—being only half-convinced—will be easy victims of the sort of propaganda or persuasion that twists the truth. "There is not a truth," wrote Mill, "however obvious and simple, the evidence of which an ingenious and artful sophist may not succeed in rendering doubtful to the uninformed, who insist upon judging all things by their own light."

Finally, perhaps the most insidious danger of all, an exposure to free discourse can sometimes prove so unsettling to the dogmatic person that he may take refuge in a pervasive scepticism and refuse any further active commitment or involvement. "A person may be without a single prejudice," said Mill, "and yet be entirely unfit for every purpose in nature. To have erroneous convictions is an evil, but to have *no* strong or deep-seated convictions is an enormous evil."[10] Mill's great ability to learn from other minds was never an excuse for scepticism or vacillation on his part. He believed in systems of connected truth in politics and ethics as well as in the natural sciences; but he also believed that human nature must proceed step by step in seeking them.

Today's conflict of half-truths is a particularly noisy one, and the combatants are particularly polarized and alienated from each other. The tendency of the young to "advertise for opinions" rather than to seek them from the wisdom of their elders or from the past has become a hackneyed topic today. Mill saw the manifestation of this spirit in his time as another example of the victory of half-truth. Certainly the wisdom of age is not necessarily characterized by "narrowness of mind and obstinate prejudice." He points out in "The Spirit of the Age" that the opinions and feelings of older people are more deeply rooted than are those of the young and such long-standing convictions are "essential to all dignity . . . and to all fitness for guiding and governing mankind." But he warns that in a time of upheaval deep-rooted convictions can very quickly become self-defensive prejudices. It is in such times, Mill says, that it becomes possible that the young *do* know more than the old, since it is much harder to unlearn than to learn; fortunately, most of the time society has more need of learning than unlearning. In the case where the young do know more, their half of the truth—the truth of the "new men"—is as inadequate as

the other half would be alone. "There is but little wisdom in any one head . . .," says Mill, "at a time when the young are wiser than the old."[11]

Claims and counter claims for the Establishment versus the so-called "Counter-Culture" ring out on today's noisiest battlefield. There are those like Theodore Roszak, author of *The Making of a Counter-Culture,* who see today's rebellion against authority as a vitally necessary alternative to what Roszak calls "the final consolidation of the organized technocracy toward which our society is moving inexorably." The arguments of those who share this viewpoint range from the lyrically brilliant vision of Charles Reich's *The Greening of America* to the often mindless effusions of those already integrated within unstructure, who—since their standards are wholly and proudly subjective—are unable to discuss their rationale in terms of any broader perspective.

Pitted against the defenders of the Counter-Culture are voices of frightened hate advocating ruthless suppression of all dissent. Fortunately there are also other and more dispassionate observers who seek to understand rather than to condemn, to trace causes and suggest remedies rather than merely to "view with alarm." Some historical and psychological analysts have compared the various manifestations of today's "flight from reason"—the growth of mystical cults of all sorts, drugs, deafening rock music, nihilistic art, astrology, tarot card, violence and vandalism, and similar patterns of behavior in the United States since Hiroshima—to the behavior of Central Europeans in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a time in which masses of people obsessed with the terror of death sought refuge in madness.[12]

Today's fiction, for instance, grows increasingly apocalyptic; and there is a growing number of writers who deal with the subject of madness in modern society. One of the best known is Doris Lessing, whose novels, particularly her most recent, *Briefing For A Descent Into Hell,* deal with this theme. The "other half of the truth" in this novel and in various recent psychological studies of the subject is that in such times as ours, madness is often a more appropriate response to a sick society than so-called "normalcy" and "adjustment" to its pressures. The psychologist Laing in his book *The Politics of Experience* says that at times madness can

be "a breakthrough as well as a breakdown." The poet Theodore Roethke in the poem "In a Dark Time," asks

> What's madness but nobility of soul
> At odds with circumstance?

More constructively, perhaps, Alvin Toffler in his best-selling *Future Shock* compares our breakneck flight into an uncharted future to the astronauts' space flights, with the crucial difference that *we* are unprepared and without protection. He writes that "the dizzying disorientation and breakdown of rational response when people are overwhelmed by demands for rapid adaptation [is] threatening to the future of rationality itself." He too views the manifestations of unreason in our culture as symptoms of breakdown. He analyzes the various kinds of inadequate responses that we tend to give to the contradictory demands of our time. Two of these maladaptions are particularly related to the theme of half-truth: one inadequate response, says Toffler, is reversion to formerly successful but now irrelevant adaptations. Such nostalgic solutions are not limited to the conservative elements in our society; Toffler believes that "the same glorification of the past infects the various hippie offshoots of the new left as it does the extreme right." Indian headdress, granny glasses, bucolic communes are all of them attempts to ape a simpler past. He calls such manifestations "the Rousseauistic cult of the Noble Savage," and "Reversionism masking as Revolution." Closely allied with this response is the adaptation of the "Super-Simplifier," who clutches, he says, at "one single neat equation" as the answer to all problems. A single idea or single "villain" is invested with universal relevance: e.g., such formulized half-truths as Dr. Spock's permissiveness is the root of all our evils; all protest is the result of an organized Communistic conspiracy; LSD will provide the heightened vision that our times require; violence is the only way to end violence and correct abuses; etc. Reductive answers such as these *do* serve to remove frustrating doubt from their holders, but, says Toffler, they "dangerously evade the rich complexity of experience."

Recently, in a *New Yorker* article, the critic George Steiner, writing of new developments in the life sciences and their impact on all of our lives, said:

> Not since the sixteenth century has scientific and philosophical thought been as conscious of the woven texture of experience, of the multitudinous skeins and cross-weave of relations whereby human consciousness, language, and the phenomenology of the 'real world' are close bound.[13]

The both/and habit of mind has always been found in the few rather than the many and has always involved the rare and difficult ability to live with tension, with unresolved dilemmas, and without the security of a single solution. Mill's analysis of such difficult transitional times included the hope and vision of an ensuing synthesis—a return to the more organic wholeness of a "normal" time after the necessary adjustments and changes are made. Yet, unless we count the period immediately preceding World War I as such an organic era, it appears that the century since Mill wrote has been merely an accelerating time of change and upheaval. Today we face a more uncertain prospect than even the "new men" of Mill's time could anticipate. Though Mill never minimized the degree to which a time of transition could dislocate those enduring its uncertainties, and though he scrupulously avoided the temptation to settle for any forced or premature synthesis, he nevertheless firmly believed in the "laws" of social progress and in the inevitable return to a new and better period of equilibrium. Most of us today cannot go much beyond a commitment to the "hazardous perhaps" of an unknown future. Some men, too, have begun to doubt whether there is any *necessary* ending to a time that Mill thought of as transitional. Yet today, as always, there are the few who are convinced that the nature of truth demands an open rather than a closed attitude.

Approaching eighty, in the last year of his life, Thomas Mann closed his essay on Chekov with these words which poignantly characterize his life-long habit of mind:

> To the question 'What am I to do?' one can but answer: 'Upon my honor and conscience, I don't know.' Nevertheless one goes on working . . . giving form to truth, hoping darkly, sometimes almost confidently, that truth and serene form will avail to set free the human spirit and prepare mankind for a better, lovelier, worthier life.[14]

And elsewhere, Nietzsche warned such rare individuals that

> The hour presses men and so they press you. And from you too they require a Yes or a No. And woe to you if you want to set your chair between For and Against. Do not be [concerned], lover of truth, because of these inflexible and oppressive men. Truth has never yet clung to the arm of an inflexible man.[15]

One of Mill's most powerful (and least accepted) arguments in *On Liberty* is directed toward the vital service that free discussion renders to even the most unquestioned and thoroughly established values and truths. "However true a opinion may be," he writes, "if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not as a living truth." If Truth itself remains unchallenged and unexamined, "it abides in the mind, but abides as a prejudice"; so that if the "opponents of all important truths do not exist it is indispensible to imagine them and to supply them with the strongest arguments."

Last year at the Century Club dinner my friend and colleague Jerry Stone discussed the need for the human and the technical aspects of life to be brought into "one single focus," and for the union of Christian and secular insights to be fused into one substance of truth. I hope he will forgive me for borrowing a sentence from his fine talk: he said that "Education should participate in unfolding the forms through which life's meaning is expressed." I would make it even stronger—Education *must* participate in such an unfolding. The University must remain a place where a free, responsible, and vital dialectic can flourish, or it will become a closed prison of old half-truths that have lost their meaning and force.

Certainly the free exchange of opinions can and does sometimes develop partisans more deeply entrenched in prejudice than before. Mill deplored what he called the "sectarianism" of his day, and we are suffering greatly from the "polarizations" in our society. But this danger, as well as all the other risks of a free dialectic, is infinitely less threatening to society than fanatical repression and closed-minded dogmatism—on whatever side they manifest them-

selves. As Mill wrote in *On Liberty,* "It is not the violent conflict between *parts* of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half the truth that is the formidable evil."

## NOTES

[1] *Mill On Bentham and Coleridge,* with an introduction by F. R. Leavis (London, 1967), pp. 101-106 *passim.*

[2] "The Second Coming," *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York, 1942), p. 215.

[3] "The Spirit of The Age," *Mill's Essays on Literature and Society* (Collier Books; New York), p. 28. All subsequent quotations from "The Spirit of The Age" are from this edition.

[4] *Ibid.,* p. 35-36.

[5] This and subsequent quotations from Mill's *On Liberty* are from the Crofts Classics edition (New York, 1947), edited by Alburey Castell.

[6] *Ancilla To The Pre-Socratic Philosophers,* translated by Kathleen Freeman (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), Fragments 8 and 51, pp. 25 and 28.

[7] Goethe, *Wisdom and Experience,* ed. Curtius and Weigand (New York, 1949), pp. 127 and 129.

[8] *On Liberty,* p. 54 *et passim.*

[9] "The Spirit of The Age," p. 39.

[10] *Ibid.,* pp 34-44 *passim.*

[11] *Ibid.,* p. 65.

[12] See especially "The Flight from Reason" by Thomas Meehan, *Horizon,* XII (Spring, 1970), pp. 5-10.

[13] March 6, 1971, "Books," p. 103.

[14] *Last Essays* (New York, 1959), pp. 202-203.

[15] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* from "The Flies in the Marketplace."

This lecture is the twelfth in a series prepared by Illinois Wesleyan University faculty members for presentation at the annual Century Club dinner. Mr. John W. Yoder, president of the club, was Master of Ceremonies. Dr. Robert S. Eckley presented the 25 year awards to Rupert Kilgore, Lillian Mecherle McCord, Anne Meierhofer and Maurice M. Willis. Entertainment was provided by Assistant Professor of Voice Sammy Scifres.


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