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Medina and Mill on Epistemic Interaction

"The Imperative of Epistemic Interaction calls for the development of communicative and reactive *habits* that operationalize our responsiveness to diverse and multiple others (no matter how different from ourselves). It calls for the cultivation of *sensibilities* that open ourselves to diverse others cognitively, affectively, and communicatively and enable us to share spaces responsibly and to engage in joint activities. Democratic sensibilities consist in cognitive-affective attitudes that facilitate and promote the capacity to relate, to listen, to feel concerned, and to care for the interests and aspirations of others."

~ José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*¹

"In the case of any person whose judgement is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and expound to himself, and upon occasion to others, the fallacy of what was fallacious. Because he has felt, that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind."

~ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*²

In his excellent new book, José Medina defends an *imperative of epistemic interaction*.³ My aim here is to offer a critical comparison with J.S. Mill's classic defence of individuality. I want to highlight one similarity and two differences.

The similarity has to do with the ethical obligations attributed to members of traditionalist communities whose view of the good life does not include critical scrutiny. Some more recent (than Mill) liberal defences of autonomy exempt traditionalists from the ethical duty to be self-questioning so long as they are rights-respecting.⁴ Medina, like

¹ José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

² J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859, ch. 3, para. 8.

³ Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*.

⁴ I have in mind John Rawls's wide public reason and Will Kymlicka's autonomy as rational revisability. See John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review* 64/3 (1997): 765-807; and Will Kymlicka, "Two Models of Pluralism and Tolerance," in *Tolerance: An Elusive Virtue*, edited by David Heyd, 81-105 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Mill, does not. His arguments appear to require everyone to improve their epistemic behaviour in all aspects of life.

The first difference is that Medina rejects Mill's assertion that new truths will inevitably be recognised as such in free and open debate. Medina argues that what he calls *responsiveness* is needed in order for this to be the case. This leads him to provide a richer and more demanding account of the satisfaction conditions for duties of epistemic interaction than we find in Mill's defence of free speech and the harm principle.

The second difference is that whereas Mill's arguments offer *moral perfection* as the single purpose of epistemic interaction, it appears that Medina, at least implicitly, appeals to a second distinct purpose which, for want of a more precise term, I will refer to as *inclusion*. If this interpretation is correct, then it makes Medina's view more complicated and less demanding than Mill's with regard to the relationship between critical engagement and epistemic interaction. To help clarify that point, I want to draw attention to the difference between *knowing about* a worldview other than your own and *thinking about* it. Knowing about a view is a matter of *familiarity*. A person gains familiarity with a worldview other than her own by learning what its distinctive social practices and defining value beliefs are. Thinking about a worldview is a further activity that implies critical engagement, which could take the form of *internal critique* or *full critique*. Internal critique involves at least one of the following: (a) critically assessing whether a worldview's distinctive social practices really are the best ways to realise its defining values, or (b) critically assessing whether one of its less important value beliefs really is defensible on the basis of the best interpretation of its fundamental values. Full critique involves critical assessment that is willing to question any of the worldview's values. I read Mill as defending the widespread importance of full critique. In contrast, Medina's inclusion-based arguments for responsiveness appear to demand only familiarity. I worry that this could make people too quick to agree to disagree, which would fuel a kind of—perhaps inevitable, but still regrettable—social distance.

Mill on individuality

Mill can be described as defending *autonomy as individuality*, which is the idea that moral perfection (i.e., a life that maximally realises our humanity) is best pursued by actively questioning your beliefs about what the good is and how to achieve it in action—especially the beliefs you inherit from your family or culture.⁵ This questioning should involve constructing, seeking out, and seriously considering objections and competing views, and committing yourself to adopting whichever view you find most convincing as a result of this ongoing process. According to this idea, the main point of talking to someone with a different perspective or way of life is to determine whether you ought to personally adopt any of her beliefs or actions. You must assess whether any part of her view brings to light a part of the truth you previously ignored or any other mistake in your opinions or conduct. If you conclude that nothing in your interlocutor's view could improve yours, then it has no intrinsic importance to you and matters only instrumentally in terms of (a) whether or not it is harmful to third parties or (b) whether it prompts you to defend your view in an invigorating way. If a view is harmless yet unfit for your personal adherence, you should support its legal permissibility but feel free, or even obligated, to share your thoughts about its faults. Your thoughts might explain how the

⁵ Kymlicka, "Two Models."

view, although in general no less good than your own, is unsuited to your particularities; or your thoughts might condemn the view as being unfit (or at least suboptimal) for anyone. Mill encourages people's mutual critical engagement. He writes:

“[T]here is need of a great increase of disinterested exertion to promote the good of others. ... Human beings owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter. They should be for ever stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties, and increased direction of their feelings and aims towards wise instead of foolish, elevating instead of degrading, objects and contemplations.”⁶

Mill appears confident that this can be achieved by arguing for freedom of non-harm-inducing speech, and by arguing against political and social penalties⁷ for conduct that does not (and cannot reasonably be expected to) harm others.

Medina on epistemic interaction

Medina defends a *resistance model* of democratic interaction, one key feature of which is his imperative of epistemic interaction. That imperative consists primarily of an *expressibility requirement* and a *responsiveness requirement*. To check whether a society has met the expressibility requirement, we must ask (i) whether multicultural and other policies enable its various groups to form publics, and (ii) whether social attitudes and other factors enable those publics to each have expressive capacities. The expressive capacities of a group can be undermined in particular by *testimonial injustice*, in which its members are unreasonably discredited as potential sources of knowledge, and by *hermeneutical injustice*, in which mainstream conceptual frameworks are objectionably unhelpful in the group's members' efforts to render their experiences intelligible to themselves or others.⁸ But expressibility is not enough. Medina rightly points out that the democratic health of a society depends as much on the ability of its groups to speak as it does on their corresponding likelihood of being heard. He describes the responsiveness requirement as being about the extent to which “the expressions of a public have the proper uptake by other publics and by society as a whole.”⁹ This too can be undermined by testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. A person in a privileged social position will tend to unreasonably ignore or discount assertions made by members of oppressed groups, because of the difficulty he faces in relating to their perspectives and experiences—a difficulty caused largely by the deficiencies of his socially acquired conceptual frameworks.

An important cause of inadequate responsiveness is what Medina calls *epistemic insensitivity*. Typically this involves a combination of ignorance about others (i.e., *social ignorance*) accompanied by, and related to, self-ignorance. A real-life example discussed in the book will help illustrate. In 2005 at the end of a fraternity party where a pig had been roasted, an inebriated fraternity student took the pig's head and placed it in front of the university's Jewish cultural centre during the High Holy Days. The student claimed

⁶ Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 4, para. 4.

⁷ If you were to thinking badly of me, express your reasons for this judgment to me and others, and choose not to associate with me, this would not, in Mill's view, be a social penalty. If you were to also use your social clout to cause additional trouble for me with the aim of improving my (not-harmful-to-others) behaviour, this would be a social penalty.

⁸ Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*, ch. 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

that he knew the building only as the one with the vegetarian cafeteria and that his intention was only to make a joke about vegetarians. He claimed ignorance about the building being the Jewish cultural centre, and about the High Holy Days, and about the use of pig symbols in the history of Jewish oppression. If we believe that the fraternity student really didn't know, then we might be tempted to conclude that his ignorance lessens the moral badness of his action. Medina rejects this conclusion, arguing that the student's ignorance makes him guilty of, among other things, epistemic insensitivity.

The student's ignorance about basic facts about Jewish culture makes him guilty of culpable social ignorance. His ignorance about the relationship between the history of his own culture and the history of Jewish oppression makes him guilty of self-ignorance. Medina argues that "responsible agency requires that one be minimally knowledgeable about one's mind and one's life, about the social world and the particular others with whom one interacts, and about the empirical realities one encounters."¹⁰ In order to pursue epistemic justice and responsible conduct, Medina argues against three epistemic vices and in favour of three corresponding virtues. Members of society, in their epistemic practices, should work to avoid being *arrogant*, *lazy*, and *close-minded*, and should seek to exhibit *humility*, *diligent curiosity*, and *open-mindedness*. As I see it, humility plays a critically destructive role, curiosity plays a critical constructive role, and open-mindedness is the character of mind needed for success in either. The fraternity student arrogantly assumed his own perspective and limited knowledge were adequate, rather than humbly engaging in self-questioning. He lazily neglected to become minimally familiar with the cultures to which members of his increasingly diverse community belong, rather than being curious about those cultures and diligently seeking to fill in gaps in his knowledge. We can infer that he was also close-minded (i.e., unwilling to try to imaginatively step into perspectives other than his own), since this would help begin to explain how his epistemic arrogance and laziness survived into early adulthood. That being said, his larger social context needs to be considered as well. Medina undertakes such consideration by discussing *meta-insensitivity* and *active ignorance*.

Meta-insensitivity is, as the name suggests, insensitivity about insensitivity. A culpably epistemically insensitive person is guilty of not knowing something he should know. A meta-insensitive person is guilty of unreasonably dismissing the possibility that he might not know something he should know. When a person cultivates that dismissive attitude he is guilty of *active ignorance*. More commonly this cultivation occurs on a community-wide or society-wide level. Medina argues that the fraternity student likely grew up in a social context that actively instilled the belief that it is unimportant to learn about other cultures and, moreover, that it is unpatriotic to learn about white America's history of oppressive actions. The injustice of active ignorance is that it creates social conditions inimical to responsiveness, which is bad both for non-mainstream publics whose full participation is thereby impeded, and for the people whose ignorance is cultivated, because their worldviews then fail to receive the corrective benefits of critical engagement with diverse others.

One Similarity

How demanding on individuals and communities are Medina's requirements for responsible agency compared to Mill's autonomy as individuality? Imagine a

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

traditionalist community (at least some of) whose members unquestioningly accept its worldview and way of life. If, further, the members of the community respect the legal rights of each other and outsiders, this would be enough to satisfy some more recent liberal defenders of autonomy in the sense that they would not place a further moral or political obligation on the group members to either question their own worldview or learn about others. For example, John Rawls argues that “autonomy as a moral value ... cannot be part of a political conception of justice” because “[m]any citizens of faith reject moral autonomy as part of their way of life” (where *moral autonomy* refers to “a certain mode of life and reflection that critically examines our deepest ends and ideals”).¹¹ Another example is Will Kymlicka who in defence of *autonomy as rational revisability* accepts that a traditionalist with a rights-respecting way of life can reasonably decline at any point in time to scrutinise her inherited beliefs, provided that she takes seriously the possibility of wanting to do so later, and therefore values the state protection of social conditions that keep the option of critical scrutiny open for her (and everyone else).¹²

But would the rights-respecting proviso be enough to satisfy Mill? No, he argues that no person is justified in her beliefs or conduct unless she has engaged in critical scrutiny, both on her own and with diverse others. Although Mill opposes the use of political or social penalties to pressure people into engaging in such scrutiny, he nevertheless clearly considers scrutiny to be something each person ethically ought to do.

Would Medina say that members of rights-respecting traditionalist communities need not themselves satisfy the imperative of epistemic interaction? I do not think he would. If blind faith opposes self-questioning, then it produces epistemic arrogance. If blind faith encourages an exclusively inward communal focus, then it produces epistemic laziness. And if blind faith claims a monopoly on trustworthiness, then it produces close-mindedness. A responsible agent must humbly doubt the adequacy of the picture of others her worldview offers her, must actively seek to increase her familiarity with the practices and value beliefs of other social groups in her community, and must make an effort to understand and take up their perspectives. I do not see any reason to think that merely being rights-respecting would exempt a person or a community from Medina’s imperative of epistemic interaction.

The First Difference

Mill’s moral perfectionism—his view of humans as progressive beings who ought always to be in pursuit of their individual and collective improvement—is what leads him to require people to individually and collectively engage in critical scrutiny of their value beliefs and conduct. As I mentioned earlier, this means that once you have carefully determined that someone’s view does not offer any (further) clues about how to improve your own, there is no moral duty to maintain or increase your familiarity with it. Instead, your duties concerning that view would be

- i. to defend the legal permissibility of it being espoused and followed by anyone (assuming the view is not harmful to others),
- ii. to share your thoughts about its faults (either as a view no one should follow or as a view people who share your particularities should not follow), and

¹¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, paperback edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xlv-xlv.

¹² Kymlicka, “Two Models.”

- iii. to defend your own view's merits (which may be generally applicable and/or only to be felt by people who share your particularities).

Mill defends (i) on the basis of human fallibility and the futility of trying to force someone to be good against her own judgment. Mill defends (ii) and (iii) as the best strategy for living well and facilitating others in their pursuit of the same. In order to support this kind of epistemic interaction, he defends free speech and free action, constrained only by the harm principle. Mill expects these measures to be sufficient because he is confident that the truth will naturally win out over time in open debate and through experiments in living. People whose opinion contains some new part of the truth will be listened to because of the merits of the content of their assertions.

Medina appears to be unconvinced by that last point. His arguments suggest that the truth of a new view will often not be recognised by epistemically insensitive people. This is why we need not only social conditions like free speech and free action that support expressibility, but also social conditions that combat active ignorance and promote the epistemic virtues in order to achieve responsiveness. This is needed in order to give new parts of the truth a chance to be widely recognised. Medina's arguments obligate you to familiarise yourself with other worldviews even when you are confident that they will not help you improve your own view. One reason for this is that your confidence might be the result of insensitivity, which can be reduced only by gaining familiarity. This is an insightful point. In this regard, Medina's view is a clear improvement on Mill's.

The Second Difference

Medina's arguments suggest to me, at least implicitly, that although the truth-enhancing function of expressibility and responsiveness is a sufficient condition for their importance, it is not a necessary one. The value of responsiveness can also be affirmed on the basis of the importance of other people's expressibility; and their expressibility can be considered important simply because they care deeply about being able to voice their views. Fellow members of society ought to give recognition to each other in ways such as this for reasons of inclusion.

This raises a question about the nature of epistemic interactions that are motivated by inclusion. Do they involve the kind of critical engagement we find in Mill's account? Mill's arguments encourage nothing but full critique—that is, critically questioning any part of a person's opinions or conduct without taking any other part of her view for granted. Familiarity on its own is given no value by Mill's arguments; and it is hard to see why he would be in favour of limiting yourself to internal, rather than full, critique (unless perhaps the shared particularities of your target audience made it reasonable to take certain value beliefs as given).

As mentioned before, Medina's arguments do obligate you to familiarise yourself with other worldviews even when you are confident that they will not help you improve your own view, because your confidence might be the result of insensitivity. But even if gaining familiarity does not in the end benefit you, you are obligated to gain it for the sake of others, since their expressibility depends, in part, on your responsiveness. One important result of this last point is that it appears that some instances of obligatory epistemic interaction lack a critical purpose. These interactions are not motivated by the desire to improve someone's view—yours, your interlocutor's, or others'. The immediate

aim is for you to *know about* the view in order to facilitate its adherents' expressibility. The thought behind this is, I think, that the rational acceptance of a worldview is not a precondition for its adherents' claim to social inclusion.

Knowing enough about a view is a matter of satisfying what Medina calls *cognitive minimums*. His discussion of the pig head example suggests that in order to satisfy those minimums, the fraternity student would need to have known enough basic facts about Jewish practices and value beliefs in order to be able to avoid causing offence. Imagine that the student were to gain familiarity with the practices and beliefs of his local Jewish community (and other non-mainstream communities in his social space), but *not* engage in internal critique (e.g., critically discussing whether current Kosher practices are justified by the value beliefs offered in support of them) or full critique (e.g., critically discussing the relative merits of ethnoreligious solidarity compared to other bases for social organising). I suspect that this lack of critical engagement would not make him count as epistemically arrogant, lazy, or close-minded on Medina's view. Concerning his failure to engage in internal critique, there is a temptation to think that this appropriately reflects the thought that he has no standing to participate in debates about how best to realise value beliefs that are not his own. Concerning his failure to engage in full critique, there is a temptation to think that this is an appropriate expression of inclusive acceptance. Although those two thoughts do have some reasonableness, they also have troubling implications about how people think of each other.

The two thoughts suggest that questioning a belief or practice shows a lack of serious regard for it. Mill, on the other hand, suggests that the best way to show respect for people is to take their beliefs seriously by subjecting those beliefs to the same questioning to which you subject your own. In doing so, you would be assuming that, like you, the adherents of other views care most about getting it right, rather than about keeping the beliefs they currently have, come hell or high water. If, instead, you limit your interaction to the pursuit of familiarity, thereafter agreeing to disagree, then you either assume that others do not care most about getting it right, or that you and they are so different as to be mutually unintelligible, rendering critical engagement pointless. Each of those assumptions creates a regrettable—and, I hope, inevitable—social distance between people.

Concluding Remarks

I have suggested that Medina's view contains something like an inclusion-based rationale for responsiveness that is distinct from the more traditional perfectionist rationale for epistemic interaction; and I have suggested that only the latter demands critical engagement. Perhaps, however, I am mistaken in my reading of Medina according to which he offers something like inclusion as a second distinct rationale for responsiveness. In that case, his imperative of epistemic interaction would be fully compatible with Mill's relentless demand for critical engagement. Or perhaps the inclusion-based rationale really is there, but it includes a demand for critical engagement that I have failed to see. Or, finally, perhaps uncritical familiarity would not lead to any kind of objectionable social distance. In any event, Medina deserves praise not only for his much-needed correction of Mill's sociologically naïve confidence in the inexorable persuasiveness of new truths regardless of the social position of the speaker, but also, more broadly and significantly,

for a fine book that sets the stage for the next round of debates on the relationship between epistemology and social justice.