The themes I shall tackle in this book are closely related, but do not form a single thread of argument. The idea that unites them is intellectual freedom, but this must be understood broadly. I am concerned to defend a kind of freedom that bears on a range of topics that have come to the fore in public debate, especially since the millennium and intensified by the spread of social media. Many commentators of widely varying persuasions have noted a rise in tribal thinking, shunning, shaming and a decline of civility of discourse. Disagreements about free speech, identity politics, equality, nationalism, and religion have become ever more acrimonious and are played out in institutions that have traditionally been held up as guardians of free expression and open debate. In certain quarters, civility and tolerance are in decline and people are cautious about expressing their true opinions or expressing reservations about those of others, for fear of social censure or even of losing their jobs.

To worry about these things is not necessarily to pin one colours to one political mast; people can disagree profoundly about many political questions yet be committed to freedom of enquiry and civil debate. Yet there are people who apparently think that concern about threats to intellectual freedom is itself part of an objectionable right-wing political stance.
For example, on the matter of the real or alleged decline of free enquiry and speech in universities, there are those who think either that the problem is grossly exaggerated, or that even if the facts are as claimed, they are to be welcomed – that it is about time that the freedom of speech of certain privileged classes is now being challenged. Here, they part company with those who are substantially on their side when it comes to (for example) matters of race, gender or sexuality but strongly defend the right of their opponents to state their views without being vilified, silenced or denied their chosen employment.

I wish to make a case, often implicitly, for intellectual freedom, while being sensitive to the ways this may sometimes need to be qualified, and receptive to counter-arguments. This will not be an easy task: the philosophical issues are difficult, and we all have biases. No doubt mine will become apparent to readers who are not guilty of them. Moreover, intellectual freedom covers a loose array of things. It overlaps with the familiar problem of free speech, but it also concerns separate questions about free enquiry, and whether there should be a right to announce the outcomes of such enquiry, or not.

To stimulate a lively sense of the problem, I shall deliberately begin in an impressionistic manner. Intellectual freedom fosters the ability to think, speak and act without being stifled by an atmosphere of taboo, whether this is legally, institutionally, or socially enforced. It enables one to live one’s life without the burden of self-censorship, without always having to second-guess the surrounding opinions and qualify one’s ideas to make them acceptable. To breathe the atmosphere of freedom is to live in a world where facts can be admitted, good reasons can be accepted and bad ones exposed; where people do not assume the worst about others and are willing to forgive them their errors and misdeeds; where people can admit to uncertainty and past mistakes without being thought weak or morally deficient; where humour, nuance, eccentricity, complexity, beauty and the erotic can thrive. This atmosphere of freedom, this general liberality, is a fundamental condition of individual and social flourishing.
The Overall Strategy

These sentiments – platitudes, some might think – will work in the background as my arguments develop throughout the book. The chapters, though partly self-contained, all discuss related themes that often crop up in the culture wars.

The structure is as follows. In this first chapter, I try to reinvigorate the case for free inquiry and discussion about any topic, guided by a desire for truth. The reader will see my indebtedness to John Stuart Mill, whose ideas on liberty are widely accepted, at least nominally, in academic circles but in practice not always enacted as enthusiastically as they might be. This will lead, in Chap. 2, to a discussion of contemporary arguments about the proper limits on free expression, especially in the light of recent events, some of which raise the matter of power differentials between speakers and those spoken to or about. Again, in the spirit of Mill, I shall reiterate his implicit distinction between causing offence and causing harm, using some recent examples of speaker disinvitations on campuses to illustrate a disturbing tendency, in some cases, towards prioritising offended sensibilities over allowing controversial ideas to be aired and debated, with the result that even private thoughts become more timid and ideologically policed than they should be, sometimes even risking a serious detachment from reality.

In Chap. 3 I discuss a seductive way to sidestep the apparent obligation to allow possible truth to be aired, which is to deny that there is such a thing as truth (or objective truth) and so nothing worth protecting or arguing over. I eventually apply this idea, no doubt controversially, to recent arguments about the philosophical status of gender identity, conceived as arising not from observable biological facts but from something irreducibly subjective such as an ‘internal sense’ of being male or female. I then proceed, in Chap. 4, to address some questions and prevailing assumptions relevant to determining the nature and extent of ‘male privilege’ and ‘white privilege’ and conclude with a brief philosophical analysis of ‘identity politics’ in general, arguing for a traditionally liberal position on these things. In Chap. 5 I note the acrimonious divisions over the issues I have discussed and ask whether, or when, we may reasonably end
friendships or initiate enmity with people we disagree with, pointing out the reasons why friendship can exist with ideological opponents. In Chap. 6 I bring various ideas together, looking at the informal fallacies and ‘intellectual black holes’ that bedevil the contemporary culture wars between what may be called identity politics, old-fashioned liberalism, and the cultural right. I outline various rhetorical tropes and modes of distorted thinking that are ubiquitous and contribute to a contemporary spiritual malaise.

The reader may have already decided that I am a ‘friend’, or an ‘enemy’. I hope, in some cases, that both judgements will be revealed as at least partly false. While I do have a general view, which may be defined as a qualified traditional liberalism, I try throughout to show the drawbacks and the questionable arguments found on all sides. As implied by the rest of this chapter, I value an old-fashioned Socratic Method in philosophy, a method of using questions, answers, counterexamples, and refinements of initial positions, not unlike legal cross examination to reach reasonable judgements. This method is remarkably effective in bringing out hidden and perhaps false assumptions in arguments found on all sides of the culture wars. It is needed to counteract lazy assumptions and over-emotional thinking, which all too often lead to needless hostility and demonisation of supposed enemies.

Conformity, the Goal of Truth and J. S. Mill

Back, then, to my opening impressions. These need to be explicated and sometimes qualified. The liberal atmosphere I advocate does not entail the absence of rational constraints on our thinking. When trying to find out the truth about something, we need to exercise duties and virtues concerned with forming beliefs – in philosophical jargon, epistemic duties and virtues - such as the duty to weigh evidence impartially and the virtue of open mindedness. How we think is important; there are better and worse ways of thinking. But rather than tell against a presumption of intellectual freedom, thinking well requires it; an environment of intellectual freedom is the best soil for the flourishing of epistemic virtues. Moreover, we are more likely to have warranted confidence in our beliefs
if we can look back on how they were formed and judge that we were free to form them as we saw fit, and were not subject to distorting influences such as the fear of censure or of not ‘fitting in’.

Those trying to form the outlooks of others, especially the young, might try to justify their attempts to enforce conformity by saying that this is the best way to ensure that people end up believing what is true. If people of school age read the ‘wrong’ books or have the ‘wrong’ conversations, they will be unduly influenced and will end up believing things that are false and dangerous. Yet even on its own terms, such an argument is dubious. Some people come to ask themselves why they believe what they do, and if they recall their formative years as a time when they were expected to hold certain views and were told off or punished if they did not, they might conclude that they were indoctrinated and that their belief-forming mechanisms were thus warped. As a result of seeing this, they might reject what they were taught and even feel angry with those who taught them, eventually disavowing not only what was silly in their education but also what was sound.

We should want to form our beliefs, especially those that are central to the meaning of our lives, using truth sensitive methods such as careful observation and reasoning, rather than using other methods which happen to lead to true beliefs in certain environments but could as easily lead to false or absurd beliefs, in other environments. If socially approved beliefs happen to be true, then social pressure to embrace these beliefs is probably effective in producing true beliefs. But individuals with conformist tendencies are more likely to embrace false beliefs if the beliefs there is social pressure to adopt are false. Since many widely accepted beliefs are false, exaggerated, or incomplete, we should be wary of accepting socially prescribed beliefs just because they are socially prescribed. We should cultivate the desire to work out what is likely to be true, and what attitudes and emotions it is appropriate to have, whatever pressures we are under to conform.

This is obviously not to say that we should disregard the opinions of others, since they may have good reasons for their beliefs. Nor is it to say that there are no authorities concerning what is true. A great many of our beliefs are taken on authority, and this is both rational and inevitable in practice. But supposed authorities are reliable only if they have good
reasons for what they hold true. Investigation often reveals that these supposed authorities got their opinions from other authorities, which in turn got them from yet other authorities, which got their opinions from sources that careful research can show to be unreliable. Often, the false beliefs persisted because of an atmosphere of intellectual conformity, or even their enforcement by totalitarian states. If you value intellectual freedom, you will be keenly aware of this, and suspicious of attempts to prevent discussion of ideas that go against the prevailing consensus, especially in such contentious areas as ethics, politics, and religion. Many beliefs widely thought to be unquestionably true are probably false, and many reasons given for believing them are unsound. In societies where independent thought is discouraged and where conformity is rewarded, false beliefs’ chances of survival are considerably increased, compared with their chance of survival in more open societies.

Much of what I say in this book is in the spirit of the liberal view forcefully defended by J. S. Mill in his famous essay *On Liberty* in 1859 (Mill, in Gray and Smith 1991) which is generally seen as the classic defence of freedom of thought and discussion. But the last thing Mill would have wanted was for people to agree with his view, as he puts it, ‘in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds’ (Mill, in Gray and Smith, 1991:70). He would not have wanted commitment to intellectual freedom to become ‘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’ (Mill, in Gray and Smith 1991: 70). When the belief in intellectual freedom itself becomes ‘a mere formal profession’, it is casually expressed by people who have no ‘heartfelt conviction’ of it and are all too ready to compromise it. This, I shall argue, is happening in many spheres, including academic disciplines, where it is having a deleterious effect on the intellectual and ethical culture of the academy.

Mill’s defence of liberty of thought and discussion belongs to a tradition whose earlier exponents include the seventeenth century poet and essayist John Milton, who argues for a free press in his essay *Areopagitica* (Milton, ed. Poole, 2014, first published 1644) and the philosopher John Locke (Locke 2016, first published 1689) who argues for a somewhat limited religious toleration. I shall return to religious themes from time to time, for
although Western nations have been mostly secularised (despite a highly religious culture in parts of the United States) we should not forget countries where religious dissent can still cost people their lives. Mill, too, addresses religious matters, as he tries to show that his arguments for liberty should appeal to Christians, if only they can be persuaded that there is no real conflict between his case for freedom and Christian devotion, properly understood. Mill was writing in socially conservative mid-Victorian England, and it is doubtful that he believed that intellectual freedom and orthodox Christianity were entirely reconcilable. But he shared Locke’s view that there was something of a contradiction in the notion of enforced religion. You can march someone to Church at gunpoint, but you cannot make them truly pray – and no doubt he thought he had arguments that devout people could accept, without diluting their religious devotion.

‘Crimestop’

Before looking at Mill’s main arguments, I shall elaborate on the motivation for my enquiry mentioned earlier. This has largely to do with the effects on people with non-conformist tendencies of a culture in which one is expected to hold rigidly prescribed beliefs on certain subjects. In Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell [Orwell 1949] inserts into his narrative passages from a book supposedly written by Emmanuel Goldstein, the hidden arch enemy of the Party and the originator of all the most wicked heresies. This book within a book – titled The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism - turns out to have been written by the Party itself, but O’Brien, the Party intellectual and interrogator, explains to Winston that as description, it is true. In it, Goldstein explains how the Party member learns the practice of doublethink:

The first and simplest stage in the discipline, which can be taught even to young children, is called, in Newspeak, crimestop. Crimestop means the faculty of stopping short, as though by instinct, at the threshold of any dangerous thought. It includes the power of not grasping analogies, of failing to perceive logical errors, of misunderstanding the simplest arguments if they are inimical to Ingsoc, and of being bored or repelled by any train of
thought which is capable of leading in a heretical direction. (Orwell 1949:167)

In the novel, the practice of *crimestop* presents something of a paradox. To stop at the threshold of a heretical thought, the Party member must know what that thought is and so must, in some sense, have already entertained it. However, the practice satirically described in the novel need not exactly correspond with any thought processes that can really occur. Self-deception, for instance, is a common enough phenomenon and covers a range of loosely related processes – motivated forgetfulness, direction of attention away from uncomfortable facts, engaging in practices that are likely to reinforce one’s view, avoiding those that might challenge it, and entertaining unnecessary doubt about one’s intellectual abilities whenever a forbidden conclusion looks inevitable. We need not suppose that the self-deceiver ever simultaneously holds two contradictory opinions while being equally conscious of both.

The most successful self-deceivers are those who are never aware that they are self-deceivers. It does not occur to them to wonder whether their beliefs came about in this way and confronting such people with the evidence of their self-deception often elicits angry denial. But not all self-deceivers are as successful as this. You can fluctuate between holding a belief comfortably and being uncomfortably aware that it may be dubiously motivated. I suggest that certain social pressures to hold certain political or religious views (to take two familiar examples) produce the uncomfortable sense of dissonance just described. You find your train of thought leading in a certain direction yet sense the pressure to resist going there, because you suspect that most people around you regard it as dangerous. The conclusion your reasoning leads to is blocked by the fear that it is unorthodox. You might also wonder whether you are qualified to question the assumptions of everyone around you, who probably know what they are talking about better than you do. Hence you internalise a practicable equivalent of *crimestop*. You cannot say what is wrong with your reasoning but conclude it might be defective because of the pressure to reject it.

This might not be a problem if *crimestop* is genuinely required and if you can perfectly use the technique when necessary. Suppose, despite the
initial evidence provided by your own reasoning and observation, you have access to higher order evidence that the group exerting pressure on you has a superior grasp of things and that you should conform to its conclusions and assumptions. In that case, the better you are at stifling your doubts and moulding your beliefs to those of the group, the happier and more rational you will be. However, it is hard to know how often we are in this situation. There may well be evidence, of an even higher order, that the group itself is mistaken. Perhaps its beliefs were inspired by a charismatic but flawed thinker who attracted a critical mass of followers, who were able to spread the word and thus create exponential levels of conformity among its new followers. Many religious and political movements began this way. Academic movements, too, can have similar origins. Given this, a reasonable person under pressure to stifle their reasoning will also know that this may lead away from, not towards, the truth.

There remains, of course, the cynic’s option: even if the group might be wrong, it would be better for oneself to believe it is right, and if the crimestop can be perfected, that is what should be done. Such clear-headed intellectual contortionism may be rare, but at a less conscious level, this is what many people do if they are entrenched in comfortable careers that require them to promote certain views and consistently ignore the evidence against those views. It is people who attach great value to honesty and integrity who feel most oppressed by an atmosphere of conformity. If their honesty is combined with open-mindedness, they will sometimes wonder whether they themselves are wrong and will therefore, at least partially, internalise the pressure to engage in crimestop. This will be partly out of epistemic humility – the awareness that they might be mistaken – and partly out of fear of disapproval.

**Conformity, Discomfort and Exit Routes**

It is uncomfortable to live in an atmosphere of socially enforced intellectual conformity, at least if you are somewhat nonconformist by temperament. It is in the assumptions you are expected to share that the conformity is at its worst, and the assumptions might never be stated.
You might, of course, share them and feel under no pressure to do so, because they seem reasonable anyway. Academic disciplines, of course, can make progress only if certain assumptions are made, and people who have no difficulty making them can then happily participate in discussion with their peers. For instance, most theologians are theists, and the flow of their discussions would be unproductively interrupted if atheists kept challenging their belief in God. Most scholars who pursue feminist philosophy are feminists of some variety, and someone sceptical of the core assumptions of feminism, for example that women in Western liberal democracies suffer systematic oppression because they are female, would be embarrassingly out of place at a feminist conference, and her interventions would be annoying.

However, problems arise when people enter a movement or field of enquiry in an open-minded way, but find that once they are in, they must shut down any thought processes that might lead them away from it. In these cases, reason was the entry route but may not be used to get out. The committed insider, of course, believes that reason supports continued involvement with the movement and that there is therefore no need for significant doubt. She might – rightly – think that continued doubt about one’s stance can be perverse, an epistemic vice (that of perverse doubt) cunningly posing as an epistemic virtue (that of open-mindedness). However, doubt can also come from realising that the stance is vulnerable to powerful criticism. If this is true but you are incapable of seeing it, something has gone wrong. The problem is not conviction but closed-mindedness. It is hard not to become closed-minded to some extent, if you associate mostly with people who agree with you – especially if the members of your in-group indulge in mutual congratulation, there is a siege mentality and outsiders are demonised. Such an environment encourages confirmation bias, causing you to notice only things that confirm your way of thinking and to ignore or explain away things that go against it. Ironically, many people who are well instructed in the problem of confirmation bias tend to notice it mostly in people who disagree with them on certain issues and not in those whose opinions they share. Having deemed that opponents are subject to confirmation bias (which no doubt they sometimes are) they see this bias in them all the time! In
other words, they suffer from confirmation bias about confirmation bias – confirmation meta-bias, if you like.

Nevertheless, we have not entirely seen why this is a problem. So far, I have mentioned the discomfort endured by non-conformists in intellectually conformist environments, and this is certainly an important consideration, not only because most of us wish to avoid discomfort but also because it inhibits us from speaking our minds when we ought. However, if we ought not to speak our minds, because we shall spout falsehood and muddle if we do, and mislead others, then the discomfort serves a useful purpose. Even when it is not a question of speaking our minds (a question I shall deal with in Chap. 2) but pursuing a private line of enquiry, it may be better to inhibit rather than pursue the enquiry if truth is unlikely to emerge from it. Why then should we not be deterred by a group, or some other authority, from pursuing such investigations?

The answer I shall defend is essentially that given by Mill. Not only does he produce a substantially sound case for freedom of enquiry, discussion and public speech (subject to what has become known as the Harm Principle) but he anticipates and replies to many objections that continue to be aired to this day. But, of course, it remains to be seen whether his answers are good ones. Maybe he is over-optimistic about the emergence of truth in a ‘marketplace of ideas’ (a term coined by H. G. Wells), maybe he naively underestimates how persuasive misleading propaganda can be, especially when spread by efficient and well-funded lobbies. In other words, maybe he overestimates the good and underestimates the harm that a climate of free discussion can bring about. This is a serious concern, because it does not depend on rejecting his general principle – that the only justification for suppressing discussion and speech is that it is harmful to others. If these things can be shown to be sufficiently harmful, then suppression might be justified even within the framework Mill sets out. This is exactly what has been argued concerning – to take three topical controversies - anti-vaccination campaigns, ‘climate denial’ and sensitive claims about transgender identity.
Free Enquiry and Epistemic Virtue

I suggest that we might find answers to these problems rather obliquely. It is worth turning again to the concepts of epistemic virtue and vice to shed light on the merits of Mill’s arguments for free enquiry and discussion. Epistemic virtue is virtue with respect to the formation of belief and hence the acquisition of knowledge. It is distinct from epistemic competence, which is shown in understanding, digesting, and retaining complex information and drawing correct inferences from it. Someone might have impressive cognitive ability yet be guilty of epistemic vices such as closed-mindedness or prejudice. (Interestingly and ironically, there is evidence of bias among social psychologists who research bias. [NPR 2011]). The epistemically virtuous person cares about having true beliefs, which presupposes that she believes in the existence of truth and the possibility of attaining it. Given this concern, she directs her cognitive abilities, however high they happen to be, to the discovery of truth and the avoidance of falsehood. It follows that she also tries to avoid falling into epistemic vice, such as (to quote a comprehensive list suggested by Linda Zagzebski) ‘intellectual pride, negligence, idleness, cowardice, conformity, carelessness, rigidity, prejudice, wishful thinking, closed-mindedness, insensitivity to detail, obtuseness, and lack of thoroughness’ [Zagzebski 1996].

Intellectual vice in general is characterised by Quassim Cassam [Cassam 2019] who quotes Zagzebski’s list of vices, as systematically obstructive of knowledge. According to Cassam, epistemic vices obstruct the acquisition, retention, and transmission of knowledge by impeding effective enquiry (Cassam 2019: 7). For instance, the arrogant person ‘has an intellectual superiority complex and is dismissive of the views and perspectives of other people. In the real world inquiry is rarely a solitary activity…This means being willing to defer to others and acknowledge that one doesn’t know it all’ (Cassam 2019: 8). I would add that the arrogance can be collective as well as individual. If I am a member of a group that thinks it has superior insights, perhaps due to education or socio-economic status, I shall very probably underestimate the insights of those who are not members of my group. I may, consciously or not, give less credence to the opinions and experience of anyone who is not ‘one of
us’ than to anyone who is. In this case, the vice of arrogance can lead to another vice: that of epistemic injustice, as discussed by Miranda Fricker (Fricker 2007), in this case, the injustice of not listening to people because they belong to groups whose testimony is perceived as being relatively unworthy of credence. Consideration of epistemic injustice is an important part of consideration of epistemic vice in general, because of the harm it does its victims.

Much writing about epistemic injustice comes, broadly speaking, from the political left. For example, feminist writers like Fricker highlight how some women are not believed when they report sexual harassment, assault, and rape. But there is nothing either left or right per se about concern to eliminate epistemic injustice. The same complaint is made on the right (again, broadly speaking) when it is claimed that that too much weight is given nowadays to what is said by historically disadvantaged groups, to rectify past injustice. There are people who claim to be oppressed by ‘political correctness’ and say that their perspectives are dismissed because they are white or male. Whatever the merits of this complaint, it too is about epistemic injustice.

There is certainly a discussion to be had about who suffers most from epistemic injustice, at least in particular environments, and this controversy is an important part of the ‘culture wars’ of the present day. But sincere concern about epistemic injustice (here, ‘testimonial injustice’, the injustice of having one’s testimony unfairly doubted) directs itself to the problem regardless of who its perpetrators and victims are. It is one thing to say that testimonial injustice is suffered more often by group X than group Y. It is an entirely different thing to say that it matters more when it is suffered by one group rather than the other.

Epistemic injustice clearly obstructs the acquisition of knowledge. Of course, if the testimony that is not believed happens to be worthless anyway, then epistemic injustice helps us, by chance, to avoid believing falsehoods. But if we tend to discount what is said by the members of a certain group because (consciously or not) we hold that group in low esteem, then we have a reduced chance of believing what they say when they are speaking the truth. Since epistemic injustice and other ‘vices of the mind’ (in Cassam’s phrasing) tend systematically to obstruct the gaining of
knowledge, they should be guarded against by anyone who cares about having true beliefs and not having false ones.

At the same time, it is not enough merely to listen to underprivileged groups, aware of the bias we may already have against taking their testimony seriously. We should also exercise the same critical judgment about what they say as we would about what anyone else says. The epistemic injustice that is facilitated by our biases consists in failing to take sound testimony and argument seriously. That is its major problem. By reducing epistemic injustice, we become more sensitive to good reasons when they are offered. But we should not become credulous of bad reasons. The goal should be to make a correct appraisal of what is said, not to reverse one’s biases. It is hard to strike this balance, but we must do so if we want to maintain a proper contact with reality.

I shall have more to say about this later, especially in Chap. 4 when I shall try to answer some objections to the idea that (allegedly) privileged people can be in a position to assess the testimony of (allegedly) underprivileged people. One such objection is that anyone from a privileged group who tries to assess objectively the testimony of the underprivileged is being disingenuous, since any attempt at objectivity is inevitably undermined by entrenched biases. What is important for the moment is to see how our brief discussion of epistemic virtue and vice can be woven into a vision of free enquiry and discussion.

How a Lack of Freedom Inhibits Epistemic Virtue

A social atmosphere of intellectual freedom is essential to the flourishing of epistemic virtue. The absence of this freedom impedes both the motivation to pursue the epistemic virtues and the effectiveness of these virtues when there is an attempt to practise them. The motivation to pursue open-minded enquiry is easily weakened if one is afraid of what one might find or how it might be received. Moreover, the attempt to practice epistemic virtue by pursuing such enquiry is largely ineffective if there is a lack of information and expressed opinions to consider.
Consider how the motivation to pursue epistemic virtue can be undermined by an absence of intellectual freedom: for example, freedom to pursue academic enquiries wherever they lead. One of the epistemic virtues is intellectual honesty. One should be honest enough to consider perspectives that one expects to find uncomfortable and that might change one’s mind. For myself, I sometimes put off reading things that might unsettle me. If I were entirely confident in my views, I would probably not be disturbed by reading this material and would only want to know the exact mistakes an author makes, so I can refute them more effectively. In that case, it would remain to be seen whether I have the virtue of appropriate confidence or the vice of closed-mindedness. But if I avoid reading the material because I am not entirely confident in my views, then the epistemically honest thing to do is to read it to reach a better judgement of whether I was right or not. But now suppose, on top of that, that most of my peers think the book I am afraid of reading is a terrible book and that its author is ignorant, prejudiced and intellectually incompetent. (They may not have read the work, but they have heard that it is dreadful – perhaps some academic star they admire has given it a scathing review). In that case, I may be afraid that if I praise the book or its author, my reputation will suffer, or I shall lose friends. This, too, could act as a disincentive to acquire the epistemic honesty I need to consider changing my mind, as well as the more straightforward moral courage to admit that I have done so.

Interestingly, it might be argued that despite this, a sense of peer pressure at least provides an opportunity to show the virtue of epistemic courage – courage to go against the grain. This is true: courage is exactly what is needed in many difficult situations. But some difficult situations should not arise in the first place and come about only because of others’ faults. The disincentive is not against courage, except in the sense that any difficult situation provides a temptation not to be courageous. The disincentive works against something that should not require courage in the first place – namely, open mindedness and concern for truth. This is what an atmosphere of intellectual conformity attacks. It also facilitates several other epistemic vices listed by Zagzebski, especially negligence, idleness, carelessness, and lack of thoroughness. If you succumb to the temptation to conform to prevailing opinions when you should not, these vices will
probably not be detected by the people whose opinions you echo and will hence be allowed to grow and fester. Worse, you may sense career opportunities promoting the favoured view, and if you work hard and are reasonably intelligent, your efforts may be rewarded. If they are, the vices are likely to become more entrenched, since few people want to admit that their life’s work is founded on error.

At least as great a problem created by intellectual conformity is that the effectiveness of the epistemic virtues is considerably hindered. You may passionately desire to nurture these virtues, taking care to notice and try to correct your prejudices, to be thorough and fair, yet have little material for these virtues to work on. In the former Soviet Union, students had to study and profess belief in ‘scientific communism’ but had little or no access to any serious critique of it. They might have encountered official caricatures of such critiques, but serious critics were given no chance to present their arguments in their own words. In Saudi Arabia, the veracity of the Quran may not be challenged, and ‘blasphemy’ is a capital offence, as it is in Pakistan, Iran, and several other countries. These are extreme examples, and there are many other less extreme ones. They illustrate that if a Soviet citizen wanted to find out whether communism truly is scientific, or if a Saudi citizen wants to know whether the Quran is the infallible word of God, it was, or is, very difficult to do so.

Admittedly, the internet enables many people living in repressive countries to encounter opinions from outside. Richard Dawkins’ atheist polemic *The God Delusion* has had an impressive number of internet downloads in Saudi Arabia. But the power of the internet has clearly alarmed the Saudi authorities, as shown in the sentencing of the blogger Raif Badawi to ten years in prison and a thousand lashes, for defending secular liberal values. (Haidar, 2015). The authorities are desperate to silence challenges to the Wahhabi version of Sunni Islam and maintain a society where it is impossible to encounter any material that challenges the prescribed religious beliefs and hence, in effect, to practise epistemic virtue with respect to these teachings.
Authoritarian Counterarguments

But what might authoritarian governments say in response? In most cases, no doubt, the repression they engage in is cynical – they are afraid of losing power and know that intellectual freedom emboldens people to challenge that power. The Saudi regime depends on the support of the Wahhabi imams, who officially legitimise the extraordinary wealth and power of the rulers. If the religion is challenged, then so is the basis of the status quo. Hence, dissidents like Badawi must not be answered (since that would only open an intellectual dialogue that they might win) but silenced, and potential followers terrorised. However, as we saw earlier, it is possible, if rare, for repression to be defended in good faith. ‘We know the truth’, it may be said, ‘and free enquiry and discussion risks leading people away from it. Reason entirely supports our view, but many people cannot follow good arguments and are easily misled by bad ones. We are therefore justified in suppressing the plausible but sophistical arguments used to support opinions that are both false and dangerous.’

This familiar approach, which Mill attributes to the Catholic Church of his day, is alive and well today in both religious and secular contexts and it is important to see its strengths and weaknesses. It is not anti-intellectual per se and is supported by people who passionately believe in defending truth. Hence it does not see itself as opposed to epistemic virtue – rather, it sees epistemic virtue (at least in unsophisticated, ‘low information’ people) as showing itself in deference to the proper authorities, rather than in open minded enquiry. The value of epistemic virtue is not in question; what is in question is how epistemic virtue manifests itself.

In popular debates, many people who think in this way, overtly or implicitly, are accused of elitism. They are charged with showing contempt for ordinary people and their ability to judge such matters for themselves. However, ‘elitism’ is an emotive word and people who use it in heated debate tend to ignore the question of whether elitism might sometimes be justified.

Suppose we take elitism to be a neutral term for the view that some people are better qualified to make judgements about certain matters
than others. For example, doctors are usually better qualified than their patients to make medical diagnoses. Engineers are better than laymen at judging whether bridges can take the weight of heavy traffic. Although no expert is infallible, there is such a thing as expertise. It is harmless enough if people believe in horoscopes or Feng Shui. But what if they deny the reality of anthropogenic climate change or the necessity to vaccinate children against measles? Should people be encouraged to ‘make their own minds up’ about these things when there is already a deluge of disinformation on ‘contrarian’ or outright conspiracist websites?

These are hard questions. There is no reasonable doubt that climate change does require decisive action, and that the herd immunity of children is dangerously compromised if more than a small percentage of children are not vaccinated. The consequences of certain sorts of false information being widely believed, especially by powerful or influential individuals, can be dire. There is also little doubt that some people are much better at processing complex information than others, or much more concerned get at a complex truth than others. It is therefore especially important to see if a recognisably Mill-inspired approach to these things can be rescued.

Mill, like Alexis de Toqueville from whom he borrows the idea, is fearful of ‘the tyranny of the majority’ (Mill, in Gray and Smith, 1991: 25-6]. Since he is concerned about social as well as legal sanctions against non-conformists, this is inseparable from the ‘tyranny of opinion’ in moral, social, or religious matters. As Russell Blackford (who has aptly chosen this phrase as the title of his recent book) interprets Mill, what is at stake is individual spontaneity, which is valuable both to the individual and to society in the long term, in giving rise to beneficial new ideas. (Blackford 2019: 16-17). But as we have seen, critics will always argue that the costs of this spontaneity can outweigh the benefits – indeed, that if Mill is to be a consistent utilitarian (he published Utilitarianism at around the same time as On Liberty) he should take this on board more seriously than he does. In fact, I doubt that the conclusions of the one essay are entirely reconcilable with those of the other. Nevertheless, we should take the arguments of On Liberty seriously in their own right, without worrying too much about Mill’s overall consistency.
J. S. Mill’s Case for Free Enquiry

How then does Mill argue against the suppression of free inquiry and unpopular ideas? He proposes four main arguments, stated at length and then succinctly recapitulated. His most cogent and influential argument is the one he begins with: ‘First, the opinion which it is attempted to suppress by authority may possibly be true. Those who desire to suppress it, of course, deny its truth; but they are not infallible.’ (Mill, in Gray & Smith 1991: 37]. Crucially, he goes on, even if you are certain that the opinion you want to suppress is false, you have no right to decide that question on behalf of others. To do so is to assume your own infallibility. Feeling certain of something is no guarantee that you are right. Even if common opinion agrees with you, much of the common opinion of today is contrary to the common opinion of other places and times. Too many people are implicitly confident of their own infallibility, even if they verbally admit to being fallible. Furthermore, the best chance truth has of eventually getting out, is when all opinions have a fair chance of being aired.

Interestingly, Mill anticipates a counterargument to this, and then answers it. The counterargument is that if we followed his reasoning, we would prohibit nothing at all. Often, we are justified in claiming certainty for a view (after due consideration of the case for and against it) even though we know we are fallible. But then, Mill powerfully answers this objection as follows:

There is the greatest difference between presuming an opinion to be true, because, with every opportunity for contesting it, it has not been refuted, and assuming its truth for the purpose of not permitting its refutation [my italics]. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for the purposes of action; and on no other terms can a being with human faculties have any rational assurance of being right. (Mill, in Gray & Smith 1991: 39)

In other words, people who advocate censorship or discourage enquiry may be justified in claiming certainty for their own opinions, if they have rigorously scrutinised them in the light of all counterarguments. However, the would-be censors propose to deny to others the right of scrutiny that
they have exercised themselves. There is no justification for this denial. Nowadays, we could express this point in terms of democratic rights. If I should have a right to investigate something, then so should you. It is irrelevant that I might exercise this right more competently than you, for it is also possible that you will exercise it better than me. I, of course, will disagree with that – and I may be correct. But even if I am, this alone cannot decide the question of who should be allowed to consider the question at hand.

Mill's second argument is that, in any dispute, there is usually some truth on both sides. Popular opinions are often true, but only a part of the truth. For example, 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…’ (Mill, in Gray & Smith 1991: 65). He is apparently suggesting that there is some truth in what both political parties say, and that good governance requires the merits of each to be given consideration.

His third argument is that even if the received opinions are the whole truth, they become dead dogmas unless they can be challenged. They are ‘held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds’. Nor is the problem removed if people are taught the grounds for their beliefs or told to defer to authorities who are themselves allowed to know the other side (as the Catholic Church advocated in Mill’s day). For example, Christianity, has, for most people, become a matter of nominal adherence rather than living faith, since it is not vigorously challenged.

Mill adds a fourth argument, saying that the meaning of a doctrine may be lost or enfeebled if it isn’t challenged; the dogma may become ‘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’. (Mill, in Gray & Smith 1991: 70).

Mill’s third and fourth arguments are related; there is a connection between beliefs held in the manner of a prejudice (mentioned in the third argument) and held as a mere ‘formal profession’ whose meaning has been lost (as in the fourth argument). Perhaps he adds them partly as a sop to the devout, to persuade them that there are religious reasons for allowing faith to be challenged. Of more significance, however, are the
first two arguments, and especially the first. The main thrust of his first argument, which is easily lost in current debate, is that if the beliefs that are officially enforced are known for certain to be true (which may not be the case) anyone should have the right to investigate them – not only a trusted elite.

Anyone who disputes this faces the question: what gives the trusted elite the right to investigate the claims in depth, but not others? The elite will answer that it is because they are better able than ordinary people to determine what is true; they are better fitted in some way – morally or intellectually, perhaps – to do the necessary impartial weighing of evidence and arguments. And they could be right. But the ordinary person will want to know on what grounds the elite makes this lofty claim on its own behalf. Anyone can claim superior insight into important matters, and the mere fact that they claim it is a feeble ground for others to believe it. Certainly, many supposed authorities that claimed important insights have been demonstrated to be wrong, like the Catholic Church at the time of Galileo. If the elite is in good faith when it claims to have investigated fairly everything that can be said for and against the view it favours, if it is in good faith when it says it values truth and believes that it should be reached rigorously, why shouldn’t ordinary people be encouraged to examine the claims for themselves? It is only by investigating the matter for themselves that they can determine whether the views of the elite really are true. The point is not that ordinary people (a phrase sometimes used with ‘populist’ overtones) have some special insight, some essential common sense that intellectuals lack. It is that we cannot, without pre-supposing the very thing that needs argument, assume that elites are right just because they say they are.

Mill’s second argument is also important, especially because it goes some way (though admittedly not the whole way) towards countering a worry I have already admitted concerning the dangers of ‘expertise denial’, sometimes cynically promoted by self-serving politicians. Mill says that in many disputes, it is relatively common that ‘…the conflicting doctrines, instead of one being true and the other false, share the truth between them; and the nonconforming opinion is needed to supply the remainder of the truth, of which the received doctrine embodies only a
part. Popular opinions, on subjects not palpable to sense, are often true, but seldom or never the whole truth’ (Mill, in Gray & Smith 1991: 63).

The world would certainly be a better place if this were more often recognised by today’s conflicting political tribes. But there is one way in which Mill’s argument can be modified to ameliorate the conflict between experts (real or supposed) and people who angrily deny what they say. For example, in the cases of climate change and vaccines, we should say both that science unequivocally shows the reality of anthropogenic climate change and the necessity of vaccines to prevent serious diseases, and that people’s rejection of these claims may not be entirely morally disreputable. For example, although they are entirely wrong if they believe pseudo-scientific claims such as that vaccines cause autism and/or do not prevent disease, they are obviously right to be concerned about autism, and are not reacting in a morally reprehensible way if they also worry about ‘unnatural’ foreign bodies being injected into their children. Although they are wrong if they deny that carbon emissions are having a potentially catastrophic effect on the earth’s climate, their concerns – for example, about the rising food and fuel prices and major adjustments to their way of life that seem to be required to combat climate change - are perfectly reasonable concerns per se, and should be considered when we work out what to do. In other words, many irrational beliefs have motivations that are not entirely culpable.

I shall discuss this general idea with reference to the Brexit dispute, in Chap. 5. Much of the tribalistic conflict between ‘experts’ and ‘ordinary people’ comes from a sense that experts talk to the public de haut en bas, and that they often confuse scientific questions about the causes of things, with ethical questions about how we should live our lives in the light of the science. This is how I propose to adjust Mill’s second argument about truth being found on both sides. Here, it is not a question of the science being in serious doubt, but a question of listening to evaluative considerations that cannot be wholly subsumed by scientific ones.

One of the causes of ‘populism’ (which as the scare quotes suggest, I do not try to define precisely) is many people’s sense that they are not being listened to respectfully by the ‘elite’ (as they conceive it) and that they are regarded with contempt just because they have doubts about expert opinion and are afraid of the adjustments to their lives that the ‘elite’ dictates.\(^2\)
They sense that they are regarded as wholly bad people, just because they have relatively conservative social views. Perhaps there is an element of projection in this – they regard the ‘elite’ as contemptible, and this causes them to believe that the elite takes the same view of them. But it should be possible for people to disagree profoundly with others, without regarding them as bad people. This point is analogous to Mill’s argument about truth being found on all sides of many political debates and it reinforces my earlier point about the need for a culture in which there is no need to exercise Orwell’s *crimestop* when it comes to lines of honest enquiry.

**Truth-Sensitive Methods and the Marketplace of Ideas**

My points so far can be summarised as follows. We should be concerned to maintain a culture in which epistemic virtue thrives. Epistemic virtue pre-supposes a belief in the existence of truth and the desirability of reaching it (i.e. attaining *knowledge*) while avoiding falsehood. There are, so far, stipulations – there is room for debate about the very existence of (objective) truth, the possibility of objective enquiry and indeed whether truth should always be paramount when we work out what to believe. There is also an interesting question (raised, for example, by Frederick Shauer) of whether the rational processes whose efficacy Mill takes for granted really do lead us to truth. (Schauer 1982, 15-34). But if I am on the right lines, we also need to cultivate truth-sensitive methods of enquiry – methods that *of their nature* lead to truth and away from error, even if in practice they do not always do so.

Following Mill, I have suggested that an atmosphere conducive to free enquiry is the best possible one for fostering these truth-sensitive methods. As Stephen Law (Law 2006) observes, while powerfully arguing for liberal over authoritarian educational methods, sound reasoning using truth-sensitive methods does not always filter out false beliefs. But it is not an accident that it usually does. We might say that it is *necessarily typical* that such methods weed out falsehood and incoherence. As Law puts it: ‘Try….to construct a strong, well-reasoned case capable of
withstanding critical scrutiny for believing that the Antarctic is populated by crab-people or that the Earth’s core is made of cheese. You’re not going to find it easy’ (Law 2006: 32).

This helps to alleviate a worry I have referred to several times, which is that truth does not always prevail in the ‘marketplace of ideas.’ On the contrary, goes the worry, all kinds of nonsense, lies and ‘fake news’ flourish in this marketplace; intellectual snake oil salesmen gather millions of followers on social media platforms and You Tube. Ideas that are soundly based are submerged and ridiculed under a barrage of fury, tribalism, hatred, and intellectual incoherence. At the same time, the complete, unvarnished truth is often quite boring, and incapable of acting as ‘click-bait’ for people wanting their prejudices confirmed, or to be outraged.

All this is, of course, true. But Mill is more prescient of this than he is sometimes given credit for. In fact, he even admits:

But indeed, the dictum that truth always triumphs over persecution, is one of those pleasant falsehoods which men repeat after one another till they pass into commonplaces, but which all experience refutes. History teems with instances of truth put down by persecution. If not suppressed forever, it may be thrown back for centuries.’ [Mill, in Gray & Smith 1991: 47]

He goes on cite numerous instances of religious persecution, mentioning that the Reformation ‘broke out at least twenty times before Luther.’ (ibid: 47). But he proceeds to make his main point thus:

The real advantage which truth has, consists in this, that when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its reappearances falls on a time when from favourable circumstances it escapes persecution until it has made such head as to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it. [ibid. 48]

But perhaps even here Mill is over-optimistic, despite having warned against a more simplistic optimism earlier. For example, might we not be hard-wired to believe in false notions, so that even if a few people discover their falsity, they rarely persuade anyone else? This has been
suggested about belief in God, which according to some cognitive scientists of religion is an evolutionary adaptation that disposes us to ‘see’ hidden agency where there is none. However, even if certain beliefs can be explained in this sort of way, these explanations would not have been suggested had people not been able to come up with them. And their influence does spread, even if slowly, and without ever persuading many people. Sometimes beliefs are discovered to be false because they have undeniably false implications, and a few people notice this and publish their findings. Moreover, however irrational we can all be, most of us have quite reliable truth-detecting mechanisms that work for our everyday lives.

But what about the many people who have clearly false beliefs, for example that the universe is only about six thousand years old, yet are highly intelligent and educated in their chosen fields? No doubt many such people keep beliefs like this in a separate epistemic compartment from their knowledge of other things because nothing in either compartment obviously contradicts anything in the other. Nevertheless, at least with some such people, their truth-detecting capacities in one area eventually leak into other areas. Our capacity for knowledge has a porous tendency, even if social and psychological forces can inhibit its operation. Provided we are, and feel, free to investigate new possibilities and change our beliefs, new knowledge and better thinking often reaches a critical mass in the educated population and the beliefs of most people slowly change. Of course, if old beliefs are protected by law or stern social reinforcement, the change is slow if it occurs at all. Mill accepts that the forces of conformity are indeed powerful. But his argument is for unfettered free enquiry, and there is good reason to think he is right about the general conduciveness to truth of the appropriate modes of enquiry, especially if they are free to operate.

Finally, someone might object that Mill has a rather old-fashioned, ill-defined notion of what those truth-sensitive modes of enquiry are. His talk of ‘reason’ seems crude. But in our discussion of free enquiry, we do not need to take a stand on the nature of the truth-sensitive methods we should adopt. In religion, for example, there is no need to rule out the possibility of a ‘divine sense’ that yields direct knowledge of God or his will. All that is important is that some methods are better
than others for finding things out. My argument, which reflects Mill’s, is that *whatever those methods are*, they are better protected by an atmosphere of free enquiry than by authoritarian attempts to suppress thought.

**Summary**

I have argued, then, that there are such things as epistemic virtue and vice, that epistemic virtue is guided by a conviction of the value of knowledge, and that legal or social taboos against nonconformist beliefs and attitudes militate against epistemic virtue. They do this by inhibiting the motivation to pursue knowledge (for example, by making people afraid to go where their thinking leads them or to speak their minds) and by stymying the effectiveness of their pursuit of knowledge, depriving them of access to the full and honestly worked out views of others. I have not argued that the notions of truth or knowledge are without their problems and have assumed, rather than argued, that knowledge is a *prima facie* good thing to possess. These issues will arise later. But for now, I shall investigate the related issue of free speech and expression, which is clearly connected to that of free enquiry, but which raises separate problems of its own, especially when it comes to the problems of offence and harm.

**Notes**

1. A term derived from Stephen Law’s book ‘Believing Bullshit, How Not to Get Sucked into an Intellectual Black Hole’, Prometheus Books 2011.
2. The most obvious example of clashes between ‘expert’ and ‘common person’ opinion, as I write, is about the legitimacy of restrictions on liberties normally taken for granted to contain the coronavirus pandemic.
1 Freedom of Enquiry

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