

# Opinion

## INTRODUCTION

THE noble Houyhnhnms are paragons of reason. They have no conceptions or ideas of what is evil in a rational nature. "Their grand maxim," according to Swift, their creator, "is to cultivate reason and to be wholly governed by it. Neither is reason among them a point problematical as with us, where men can argue with plausibility on both sides of the question; but strikes you with immediate conviction, as it needs must do where it is not mingled, obscured, or discolored by passion and interest."

What Captain Gulliver finds most striking in the contrast between men and this noble race of horses is that the perfect rationality of the Houyhnhnms lifts them entirely above the vagaries and vicissitudes of opinion. "I remember it was with extreme difficulty," he says, "that I could bring my master to understand the meaning of the word *opinion*, or how a point could be disputable; because reason taught us to affirm or deny only where we are certain, and beyond our knowledge we cannot do either. So that controversies, wranglings, disputes, and positiveness in false and dubious propositions, are evils unknown among the Houyhnhnms."

Among men it is not the meaning of "opinion" but of "knowledge" which causes trouble. If men had no conception of knowledge at all, as the Houyhnhnms seem to have no conception of opinion, they would find themselves disagreeing about many matters of opinion, but probably not about the nature of opinion itself. The great controversies concerning opinion in the tradition of western thought all relate to its distinction from knowledge, both with regard to the difference in their respective objects and with regard to

the way in which the mind works when it knows and when it opines.

Only when something better than opinion is proposed as attainable do the characteristics of opinion come to be questioned. That something may stand in relation to opinion as certainty to probability, as fact to conjecture, as adequate to inadequate knowledge, as demonstration to persuasion. The chief source of disagreement about the nature of opinion seems to be the meaning of the other term in the comparison. Yet a few commonly recognized features of knowledge—if that is taken as the contrasting term—throw some light on the characteristics of opinion. Certain things which are never said about knowledge seem to be generally said of opinion.

AN OPINION, it is said, may be either true or false. But knowledge is never said to be false. For a great many writers, though not for all, doubt and belief are attitudes of mind which accompany the holding of opinions, but not the possession of knowledge. It is possible to opine and doubt at the same time, but not to know and doubt. Belief overcomes doubt with respect to opinion, but in those matters in which the mind is convinced of the truth of its judgments, an act of belief does not seem to be necessary.

In the sense in which belief implies a willingness to assent where assent might reasonably be withheld, belief seems to be appropriate to opinion but incompatible with knowledge. The opposite of an opinion may be reasonably maintained, whereas the opposite of that which is known must be error or falsehood, and therefore untenable. The traditional distinction between axioms and postulates (or

assumptions) exemplifies this difference between knowledge and opinion. If a proposition is axiomatic, its contrary must be false. But if something is proposed as an assumption to be taken for granted, then its opposite can also be postulated, and probably will be postulated by those who are unwilling to grant what has been proposed. "What we firmly believe," Russell declares, "if it is neither knowledge nor error . . . may be called *probable opinion*. Thus the greater part of what would commonly pass as knowledge is more or less probable opinion."

This last point in the comparison of knowledge and opinion appears to have political significance. It is not merely that men are accustomed to expect more disagreement in the sphere of politics than in science; they take a different attitude toward scientific and political controversy, largely because one is supposed to occur in the domain of knowledge and the other in the realm of opinion. Men speak of having a right to their own opinions, which includes a right to persist in them despite the conflicting opinions of others. The notion of a right to a certain obstinacy in differing from one's fellowmen seems to follow from the nature of opinion and to accord with its distinction from knowledge. With regard to matters concerning which it is supposed that knowledge rather than opinion is possible, disagreement may of course occur, but never without the expectation that reasonable men should be able to reach agreement on the disputed point by reexamining the facts.

The differences between men which we appeal to a consensus to resolve are differences of opinion, not knowledge. Sometimes conflicts of opinion cannot be settled in any other manner, and for practical purposes it may be necessary to accept the opinion of the majority. The theory of majority rule raises many questions on which the great books take opposite views, but for the most part they restrict the application of the theory to matters of opinion. Disputed issues in mathematics or other theoretical sciences are seldom, if ever, settled by counting heads. The weight of numbers seems to be peculiarly relevant to measuring the worth of conflicting opinions. "In

all matters not contrary to faith," Tocqueville tells us, "one must defer to the majority."

The traditional consideration of opinion naturally divides, therefore, into two major lines of discussion. The first deals with the theoretical problem of the difference between knowledge and opinion, and involves such related terms as doubt, belief, faith, certitude, and probability. The second assumes that distinction for the most part, and deals with the problems of decision and responsibility in the sphere of opinion—the problem of liberty of conscience, of freedom of thought and expression, of majorities and minorities, and of individual judgment in difficult cases of conscience.

THE DISTINCTION between knowledge and opinion is sometimes made in terms of a difference in their objects, and sometimes in terms of a difference in the way the mind works when it knows and when it opines. These two modes of differentiation may, of course, supplement one another—the object of opinion being such that the mind must operate in a certain way with respect to it. The same authors usually treat the matter both ways. But not all the great books in which these things are discussed use the words "knowledge" and "opinion" to signify the basic opposition.

Locke, for example, says that "the mind has two faculties conversant about truth and falsehood: first, knowledge, whereby it certainly *perceives* and is undoubtedly satisfied of the agreement or disagreement of any ideas; secondly, judgment, which is the putting ideas together, or separating them from one another in the mind, when their certain agreement or disagreement is not perceived, but *presumed* to be so." To the faculty of judgment belongs "belief, assent, or opinion, which is the admitting or receiving of any proposition for true, upon arguments or proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain knowledge that it is so."

As demonstration is to persuasion, as certainty is to probability, so for Locke knowing or perceiving stands to judging or presuming. Others, like Hume, tend to use the term 'belief' in the place of 'opinion' as the opposite

of 'knowledge'; or, like Spinoza, to assign opinion along with imagination to the domain of inadequate as opposed to adequate knowledge. But such differences in vocabulary do not seem to obscure the fact that these authors are making distinctions which, if not identical, are at least analogous.

A certain parallelism or analogy exists between different statements of the objects of knowledge and opinion. The knowable seems to have the properties of necessity and immutability, of universality, clarity, and distinctness. That which is contingent and variable, or confused and obscure, is usually regarded as the object of opinion.

Plato, for example, says that that which is apprehended by intelligence and reason "always is, and has no becoming," whereas "that which is conceived by opinion with the help of sensation and without reason, is always in a process of becoming and perishing and never really is." As understanding and reason divide the realm of knowledge, whose object is the immutable being of the intelligible forms, so fancy and perception divide the realm of opinion, whose objects are the sensible things which come to be and perish.

According to Aristotle, the object of science is the essential and the necessary, the object of opinion the accidental and the contingent. To whatever extent sensible particulars involve contingent accidents of all sorts, they belong to opinion, while the intelligible essences of things, universal in the sense of being common to many individuals, belong to science. The parallel which so far seems to be present between Plato's and Aristotle's statements of the objects of knowledge and opinion does not continue when we consider the consequences of their analyses.

For Aristotle, it is possible to have scientific knowledge as well as probable opinion about the changing things of the physical world, to the extent that these things are both intelligible and sensible, and have aspects both of necessity and contingency. But for Plato the realm of becoming belongs exclusively to opinion, as the quite separate realm of being belongs exclusively to knowledge. In consequence, Aristotle's enumeration of the sci-

ences includes physics along with mathematics and theology, whereas the study of the physical world does not yield a science, according to Plato, but only, as he says in the *Timaeus*, "a likely story"—a plausible composition of probable opinions.

At first glance, Hume seems to provide a closer parallel to Plato. "All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds," he writes, "*relations of ideas*, and *matters of fact*." Objects of the first sort are capable of demonstratively certain knowledge, e.g., the mathematical sciences. Matters of fact, which include questions concerning the real existence of anything or the causal connection of one thing with another, do not permit demonstration. They are objects of belief or opinion.

It would seem, therefore, that Hume, like Plato, regards the objects of knowledge and opinion, or science and belief, as belonging to altogether distinct realms. They even seem to agree that physics cannot be classified as a science, though the probabilities it establishes may be quite sufficient for action. But this agreement must be qualified by the fact that the realm of ideas is for Plato the reality which changing things image, while for Hume ideas have no reality at all. They exist only in the mind, which obtains them from the impressions of sense-experience.

A parallel between Hume and Aristotle might also be drawn, at least insofar as both connect opinion with the contingent—that which can be otherwise. If the opposite of a proposition is not impossible or does not lead to self-contradiction, then the proposition and its contrary are matters of opinion. This criterion, in Aristotle's terms, excludes all self-evident and demonstrable propositions. Such propositions, for both Hume and Aristotle, express knowledge, not opinion. Yet Aristotle, unlike Hume, does not seem to think that the real existence even of immaterial beings is indemonstrable, or that no necessary connections can be discovered between cause and effect.

THESE EXAMPLES might be extended to include similar observations concerning Locke,

Spinoza, Kant, William James—in fact, almost every writer who distinguishes between knowledge and opinion by reference to characteristically different objects. In the tradition of western thought the major controversies concerning the objects of knowledge and opinion occur with regard to the kind of being or reality assigned to each type of object; and, in consequence, with regard to applications of the distinction. One writer treats as knowledge what another, by apparently the same criterion, calls opinion. The term ‘opinion’ gets its skeptical impact from this circumstance. The skeptic never denies that men can form opinions about a given subject; he denies that the topic can be a matter of certain or unquestionable knowledge.

Skepticism approaches its limit when it is maintained that everything is a matter of opinion. At the furthest extreme, it is sometimes said that nothing is either true or false, though Aristotle and others argue that such skepticism is self-destructive since the proposition ‘nothing is true or false’ is inconsequential if it is false, and self-contradictory if it is true. But the proposition ‘everything is a matter of opinion’ can itself be an opinion, and its opposite an opinion also.

The position which Montaigne takes in the *Apology for Raymond Sebond* is not the provisional skepticism of universal doubt in order to discover the foundations of certain knowledge. It is rather a resolute skepticism which reduces all human judgments to the status of equally tenable opinions and gives man no hope that he will ever be able to do better than adopt opinions on insufficient grounds or else suspend judgment entirely. No axioms, according to Montaigne, have ever won the universal consent of mankind; no demonstrations have ever escaped the need to assume their initial premises. Unless men beg the question in this way, they cannot avoid an infinite regress in reasoning. There is no proposition about which men have not disagreed or changed their minds. Illusions and hallucinations suggest the pervasive unreliability of the senses, as errors of judgment and reasoning suggest the radical infirmity of the mind.

“How diversely we judge things!” writes

Montaigne. “How many times we change our notions! What I hold today and what I believe,” he continues, “I hold and believe it with all my belief . . . I could not embrace or preserve any truth with more strength than this one. I belong to it entirely, I belong to it truly. But has it not happened to me, not once, but a hundred times, a thousand times, and every day, to have embraced with these same instruments, in this same condition, something else that I have since judged false? . . . we must become wise at our own expense. If I have often found myself betrayed under just these colors, if my touchstone is found to be ordinarily false, and my scales uneven and incorrect, what assurance can I have in them this time more than at other times? . . . We should remember, whatever we receive into our understanding, that we often receive false things there, and by these same tools that are often contradictory and deceived.”

MONTAIGNE EXEMPTS religious faith from the uncertainty of all beliefs or opinions which man arrives at through the unaided efforts of his senses and his reason. Though we must “accompany our faith with all the reason that is in us,” we must do so “always with this reservation, not to think that it is on us that faith depends, or that our efforts and arguments can attain a knowledge so supernatural and divine.” Faith is distinguished from ordinary belief, according to Montaigne, only if it enters into us “by an extraordinary infusion.”

What is an article of faith to one man may, however, be merely a matter of opinion to another. This seems to be generally recognized by all who differentiate religious faith from secular belief. The difference lies not in the object, but in the causes of belief.

Those who distinguish between knowledge and opinion also admit that a difference in the way the mind judges is able to produce either knowledge or opinion concerning the same object. It is impossible, according to Aristotle, for the same mind with regard to the same object to know and opine at the same time. A given individual, for example, cannot hold a proposition of geometry to be true *both* as a matter of knowledge and of opinion. But

this does not prevent the individual who once held the proposition to be true merely on the authority of his teacher—and thus as a matter of opinion—from subsequently learning the reasons for its truth and thus coming to know what formerly he merely opined. Two individuals may likewise assert the same truth in different ways, the one as knowledge, the other as opinion.

The traditional account of the difference in the activity of the mind when it knows and when it opines appears to involve two related points. The point which both Plato and Aristotle emphasize is that the man who knows does not merely assert something to be true, but has adequate reasons for doing so. The truth of right opinion is no less true than the truth of knowledge. It differs, as the discussion in Plato's *Meno* and *Theaetetus* seems to show, in that the man of right opinion cannot explain why what he asserts is true. He cannot give the causes of its truth, or trace its connections with other truths which help to demonstrate it. The fact that an opinion is true does not prevent its being overturned or given up, since without adequate reasons it is insecure against attack. Unsupported by reasons, opinion is not only unstable as compared with knowledge, but it is also unteachable in the sense in which knowledge can be learned and taught. The man of right opinion, unable to explain satisfactorily why he thinks as he does, cannot help others understand the rightness of his opinions.

Russell writes of the dualism regarding knowledge of truths: "We may believe what is false as well as what is true. We know that on very many subjects different people hold different and incompatible opinions: hence some beliefs must be erroneous. Since erroneous beliefs are often held just as strongly as true beliefs, it becomes a difficult question how they are to be distinguished from true beliefs. How are we to know, in a given case, that our belief is not erroneous? This is a question of the very greatest difficulty, to which no completely satisfactory answer is possible."

The other characterization of the mind's activity in forming opinions seems to follow from the preceding observation. If reasons do

not determine the mind to think *this* rather than *that*, what is the cause of its judgment? If the mind is not compelled by the object under consideration to think of it in a certain way, what does move the mind in its act of assent or dissent to that which is proposed? To such questions, the traditional answer seems to be wish or desire, whether an act of free choice on the part of the will or an inclination determined by the driving power of the emotions.

Pascal makes this point when he observes that there are two ways in which men come to think as they do. The more natural way "is that of the understanding, for one should only agree to demonstrated truths; but the more usual . . . is that of the will; for all men are nearly always led to believe, not by proof, but by inclination." Hobbes similarly differentiates knowledge, which rests upon definitions and demonstrations, from the opinions or beliefs which the mind adopts, not as the result of reasoning, but by an act of will.

The assent of reason is not, according to Aquinas, subject to command by the will in respect to all matters on which the reason can judge. If "that which the reason apprehends is such that it naturally assents thereto, *e.g.*, first principles, it is not in our power to assent to it or to dissent. For in such cases," he holds, "assent follows naturally, and consequently, properly speaking, is not subject to our command. But some things which are apprehended do not convince the intellect to such an extent as not to leave it free to assent or dissent, or at least suspend its assent or dissent for some cause or other; and in such things, assent or dissent is in our power, and is subject to our command." Knowledge, it would seem, consists in those judgments wherein the mind is moved to assent solely by the matter being considered, whereas all matters about which we are free to make up our minds one way or the other are matters of opinion.

Though they vary in the terms of their analyses, Descartes, Locke, and Hume seem also to agree that when the mind is moved to assent by the relations it perceives between ideas, especially when these are clear and distinct, it knows beyond doubt or the possibility of error. But when the mind, lacking such in-

tuitive or rational grounds, nevertheless forms a judgment concerning what is not evident, then the result is opinion entertained as merely probable, accompanied by doubt, and subject to error.

For Descartes, the will, freely exercised, moves the mind to such fallible judgments. Except when it is so moved the mind, responding to its object alone, is naturally infallible. For Hume, the mind is free to imagine whatever it pleases, but its beliefs are determined by a sentiment or feeling of instinctive origin, "which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure." The issue between those who connect opinion with free will and those who deny that beliefs are voluntarily formed is discussed in the chapter on WILL. It does not seem to affect the fairly general agreement on the point that opinion is an act of the mind caused by *something other than the object itself* which the mind is considering.

DOES THIS DISTINCTION between knowledge and opinion exhaustively divide all the acts of the mind? As we have seen, Montaigne appears to reject both alternatives and substitutes instead supernatural faith and ordinary belief. Aquinas, on the other hand, accepts knowledge and opinion as exhaustive on the plane of the mind's natural operations and makes religious faith a supernatural alternative to both.

He calls faith a mean or intermediate between science and opinion because he conceives it as having some of the characteristics of each. "To believe," he says, "is an act of the intellect assenting to the truth at the command of the will." In this faith resembles opinion. The act of faith is due to the will rather than to the rational evidence of the object. Faith is "the evidence of things unseen." But faith also resembles science because the affirmations of faith have the certitude or freedom from doubt which characterizes knowledge. According to Aquinas, faith has greater certitude than natural knowledge, since, as intellectual virtues, "science, wisdom, and understanding . . . are based upon the natural light of reason, which falls short of the certitude of God's word, on which faith is founded." Faith differs from knowledge in that the object of faith

exceeds the intellect's comprehension. That is why faith requires an act of the will to move the intellect to assent; but whereas ordinary opinions are adopted by a man's own volition, Aquinas attributes faith to God. "Faith," he writes, "as regards the assent which is the chief act of faith, is from God moving man inwardly by grace."

Just as skepticism with respect to science takes the form of reducing all human judgments to opinion, so skepticism with respect to religion takes the form of attributing all belief to purely natural causes. If Freud is correct that all beliefs are the product of wishful thinking, then it is difficult to separate religion from superstition or prejudice—or even, perhaps, to separate science from religion.

James finds the will to believe in science as well as religion. Like Freud, he explains belief in terms of emotion and desire. "Will and Belief, meaning a certain relation between objects and the Self," he writes, "are two names for one and the same *psychological* phenomenon." Except for those necessary truths which concern only ideal relationships, the mind in thinking about reality is free to choose between alternative theories, in the sphere of science as well as in religion. To believe is to attribute reality to a theory. Though the operation of the will to believe is not for James entirely independent of objective criteria, neither is it mainly determined thereby.

"That theory will be most generally believed," he says, "which, besides offering us objects able to account for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs . . . So-called 'scientific' conceptions of the universe have so far gratified the purely intellectual interests more than the mere sentimental conceptions have. But . . . they leave the emotional and active interests cold. *The perfect object of belief would be a God or 'Soul of the World,' represented both optimistically and moralistically (if such a combination could be), and withal so definitely conceived as to show us why our phenomenal experiences should be sent to us by Him in just the very way in which they come.*"

OPINION RAISES moral and political as well as psychological issues of liberty. One of them is the problem of freedom of discussion. This problem has aspects which belong to other chapters—freedom in scientific inquiry to SCIENCE, freedom in artistic or poetic expression to ART and POETRY, freedom of conscience and worship to RELIGION, freedom in teaching to EDUCATION, and the general issue of freedom of thought and speech to the chapter on LIBERTY. Yet what is common to all these related questions seems to be determined by the nature of opinion, particularly in its distinction from knowledge.

None of the books which argue for freedom of expression—Milton's *Areopagitica*, Locke's letter *Concerning Toleration*, or J. S. Mill's essay *On Liberty*—defends the right to disseminate error or falsehood *knowingly*. All of them argue that the individual who claims the right to be heard is morally bound by the duty to speak the truth as it appears to him. Nor do those, like Plato and Hobbes, who recommend political censorship seek thereby to fortify the state by suppressing truth. In saying that the sovereign should "judge of what opinions and doctrines are averse, and what conducing to peace," Hobbes observes that "though in matters of doctrine, nothing ought to be regarded but the truth, yet this is not repugnant to regulating the same by peace. For doctrine repugnant to peace can no more be true, than peace and concord can be against the law of nature."

Since knowledge as distinct from opinion has the character of incontrovertible truth, the issue of freedom or censorship cannot be stated in terms of knowledge. But what some men hold to be knowledge others regard as opinion. The issue of free expression applies therefore to the entire range of human thought on the supposition that *no* proposition or doctrine is exempt from controversy, and no human judgment secure from contradiction. This supposition does not abolish the distinction between knowledge and opinion; nor does it flout the law of contradiction by treating opposite answers to the same question as in fact equally true.

"In formal logic," writes Whitehead, "a

contradiction is the signal of a defeat: but in the evolution of real knowledge it marks the first step in progress towards a victory. This is one great reason for the utmost toleration of variety of opinion." Whitehead thus agrees with Mill, that for the pursuit of truth, such toleration is necessary.

"If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind," according to Mill, "would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind . . . The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error."

Mill advances four distinct reasons for recognizing "the necessity to the mental well-being of mankind (on which all their other well-being depends) of freedom of opinion, and freedom of the expression of opinion . . . First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility. Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and . . . it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied. Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled."

The aim is not to perpetuate controversy; nor is it to keep all doctrines perpetually on the level of debatable opinion. "As mankind improve," Mill writes, "the number of doctrines



which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase; and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested. The cessation, on one question after another, of serious controversy, is one of the necessary incidents of the consolidation of opinion; a consolidation as salutary in the case of true opinions, as it is dangerous and noxious when the opinions are erroneous."

As Mill argues the case for freedom of thought and discussion, it appears to be based on the hypothesis that the public debate of all matters, carried on without any restriction except those minimum restraints needed to prevent violence, serves the end of separating true from false opinion and, by the clarification of opinion as well as the correction of error, discovering the reasons which turn opinion into knowledge. It is not to multiply opinions but to advance knowledge, not to encourage skepticism but to invigorate the search for truth, that Mill advocates the submission of all matters to open dispute so long as any disagreement remains.

His fundamental principle, like that of Locke, consists in divorcing political from logical criteria. Logically, the disputants may stand opposed to each other as one who knows and one who merely opines, or as one who holds a true and one a false opinion, or even as one who enjoys God's gift of supernatural faith and one who lacks such light; but considered politically, the opponents represent a conflict of opinion, with each party equally deserving the benefit of the doubt that it may have the truth on its side. If the state were to intervene, it would be deciding a disputed question, not by reason, but by force, in an area to which force is inapplicable.

"The business of laws," Locke writes, "is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth, and for every particular man's goods and person. And so it ought to be. For the truth certainly would do well enough if she were once left to shift for herself . . . She is not taught by laws, nor has she any need of force to procure her entrance into the minds of

men. Errors indeed prevail by the assistance of foreign and borrowed succours. But if Truth makes not her way into the understanding by her own light, she will be but the weaker for any borrowed force violence can add to her."

Those who argue that state censorship is justified, whether the matters whose debate is prohibited are speculative or practical, moral, political, or theological, appear to extend the safeguarding of the common good beyond security from immediate peril of violence; or to proceed upon the hypothesis of sufficient wisdom in the rulers to discriminate unerringly between truth and falsehood. Those who distinguish between church and state with regard to censorship tend to limit the application of ecclesiastical authority to questions of faith and morals, on which the church is supposed to have supernatural guidance in deciding what is true or sound.

THE PRINCIPLE OF majority rule in matters of opinion seems to be opposite to the principle that the voice of a minority should be heard. To settle a difference of opinion by taking a vote gives a decisive weight to numbers which, it may be thought, is as illegitimate as resolving a debate by force. But when it is necessary to legislate or to act, debate must be terminated and issues resolved.

On speculative questions, which may be answerable by knowledge rather than by opinion, and with respect to which agreement may be possible, the end of truth seems to be served by permitting discussion to go on as long as reason opposes reason. But if the discussion is for the sake of determining action and if, in addition, the subject under discussion is strictly a matter of opinion concerning which it is possible for reasonable men perpetually to disagree, then it may be necessary to appeal to some principle other than reason.

Traditional political theory appears to offer only two solutions. One principle of decision is to follow the opinion of a single man—an absolute monarch or an elected chief magistrate—whether or not that one man also has the wisdom commensurate with such responsibility. The other principle is to accept the opinion of the majority. According to Aristot-



le, this second principle is operative in every form of government except absolute monarchy. It is not only in democracy, he says, that "the greater number are sovereign, for in oligarchy, and indeed in every government, the majority rules." It is characteristic of every form of constitutional state that "whatever seems good to the majority of those who share in the government should have authority."

Considered in this way, the principle of majority rule leaves open the question whether the majority should be a preponderance of the many or the few. Should it be a democratic majority or, according to some aristocratic standard, the majority of the few who are wiser, more expert, or more virtuous than the many? With regard to some questions, Aristotle suggests, the multitude may be a better judge than any individual, even the most expert. "If the people are not utterly degraded, although individually they may be worse judges than those who have special knowledge, as a body they are as good or better."

The opposing claims of the greater number and the more competent, as well as the possibility of combining the merits of both, are discussed in the chapters on DEMOCRACY and ARISTOCRACY. The problem of majority rule also appears in those chapters as a factor in the theory of representation, especially the question considered by Mill—whether the representative shall exercise his own judgment or act on the opinion of the majority of his constituents.

Mill tries to separate those problems of gov-

ernment which should be submitted to representative assemblies and decision by majorities from those which should be solved by experts. But even on matters subject to deliberation by representatives of the people, Mill advocates such measures as plural voting and minority representation to offset the sheer weight of numbers and prevent its being the decisive force in settling political differences and determining action.

Such qualifications of the principle of majority rule do not seem necessary to those who, like Rousseau, think that "the general will is found by counting votes." What Rousseau says of any individual opinion applies to minority opinions as well, namely, that when a contrary opinion prevails, it proves that what the minority "thought to be the general will was not so." On the question of how large a majority should be decisive, he thinks that "the more grave and important the question discussed, the nearer should the opinion that is to prevail approach unanimity . . . The more the matter in hand calls for speed, the smaller the prescribed difference in the number of votes may be allowed to become."

There is, according to Rousseau, only one political decision which requires unanimity, and that is the decision to enter upon the social contract, to set up popular government under which individual liberty endures as long as "the qualities of the general will still reside in the majority." When the principle of majority rule is unanimously adopted, each individual agrees to substitute the general will for his own particular opinion.