

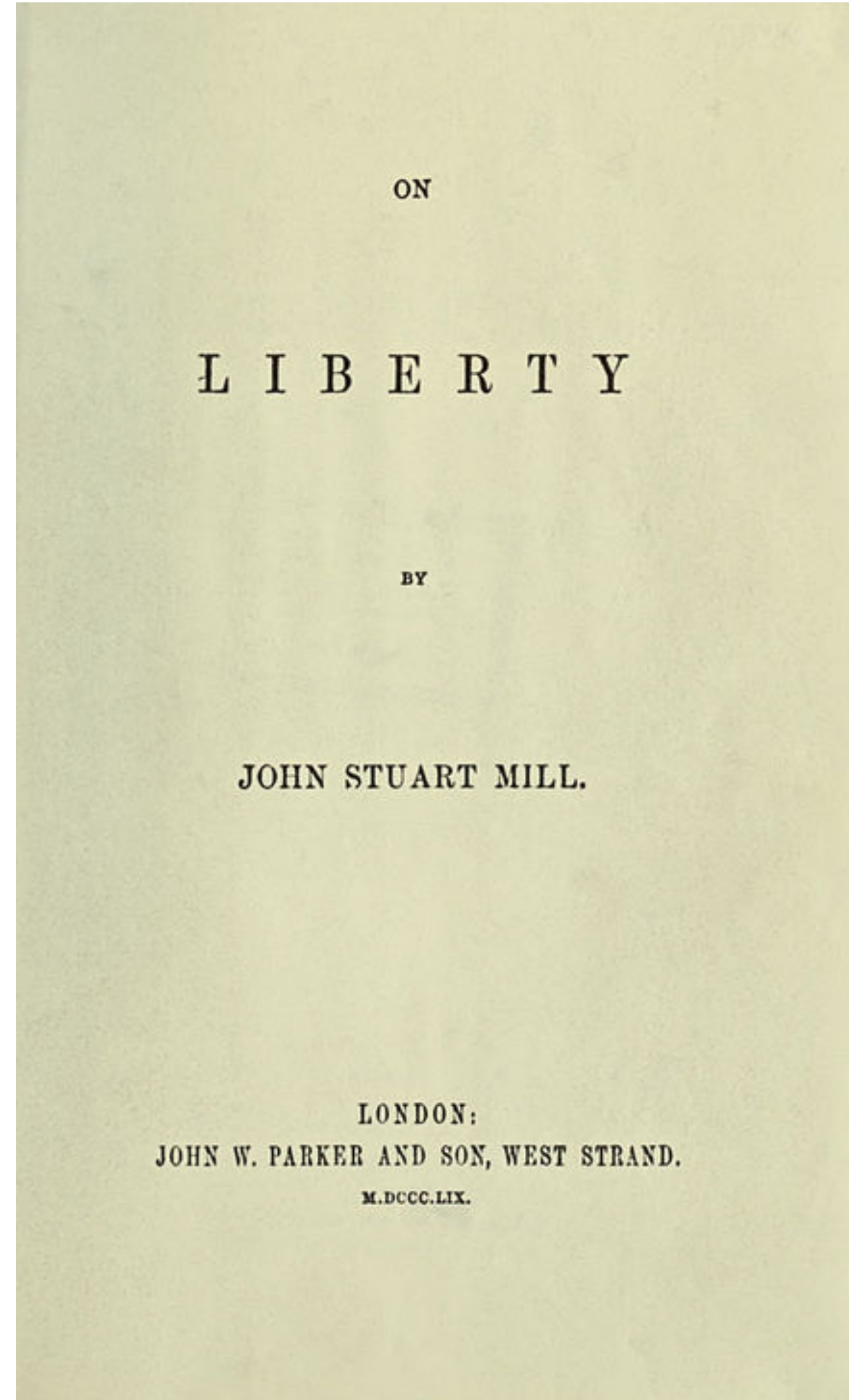
24.150 Liberalism, Toleration, and Freedom of Speech, Fall 2023

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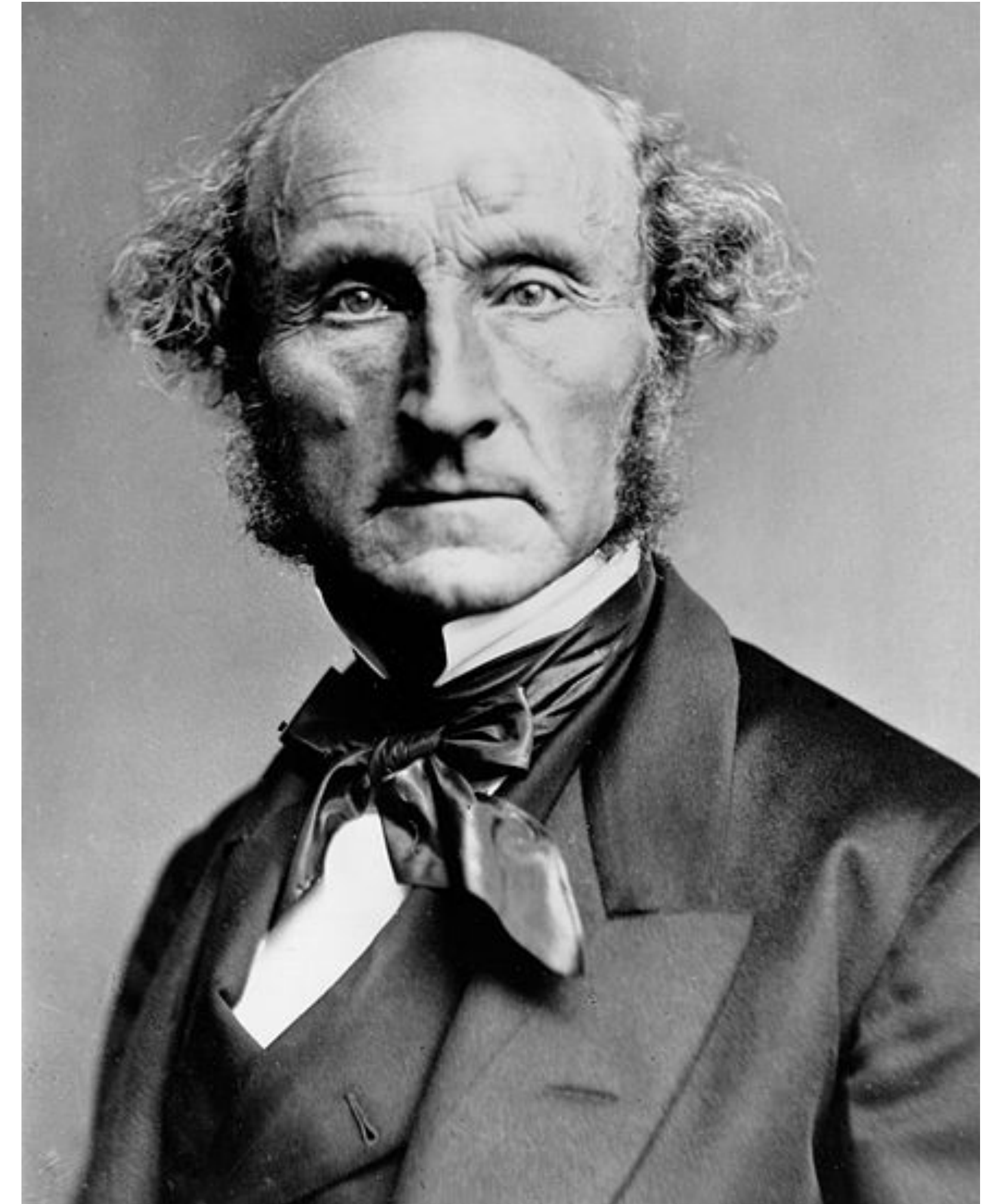
today's reading

selections from ch. 2

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1806-1873

A. J. Glazebrook.

A SYSTEM OF LOGIC,

RATIOCINATIVE AND INDUCTIVE:

BEING A

CONNECTED VIEW OF THE PRINCIPLES OF EVIDENCE

AND THE

METHODS OF SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION.

BY

JOHN STUART MILL.

EIGHTH EDITION.



NEW YORK:
HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS,
FRANKLIN SQUARE
1881.

UTILITARIANISM

BY

JOHN STUART MILL.

REPRINTED FROM 'FRASER'S MAGAZINE.'

LONDON:

PARKER, SON, AND BOURN, WEST STRAND.
1863.

[The Author reserves the right of Translation.]

THE

SUBJECTION

OF

WOMEN

BY

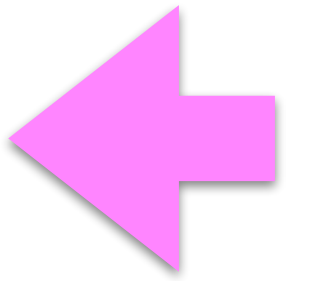
JOHN STUART MILL

LONDON

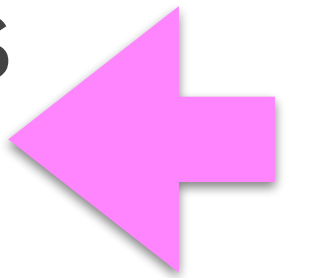
LONGMANS, GREEN, READER, AND DYER
1869

1. Which of these arguments does Mill give against restricting freedom of speech and opinion?

a. The opinion may possibly be true, and suppressing the truth is bad.



b. Even if the opinion is known to be false, suppressing falsehoods is bad.



c. Even if the opinion is known to be dangerous, suppressing dangerous opinions is even more dangerous.

the thesis of chapter 2

I deny the right of the people to exercise such coercion [that is, control the expression of opinion], either by themselves or by their government. The power itself is illegitimate.

If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.

Mill, John Stuart. From "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." Chapter 2 in *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Edited by David Bromwich and George Kateb. Yale University Press, 2003. © Yale University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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notes: (i) opposes social as well as governmental control; (ii) no "hate speech" exception; (iii) does not say "free expression is good, but sometimes must give way when it conflicts with other things of value."

the argument of chapter 2

...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. (87)

Mill, John Stuart. From "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." Chapter 2 in *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Edited by David Bromwich and George Kateb. Yale University Press, 2003. © Yale University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Let P be some claim (the Earth is round, covid-19 is a hoax, whatever).
Either P is true or P is false.

P1. Suppose P is true. Then suppressing P means that those who deny P will persist in their error, which is bad.

P2. Suppose P is false. Then suppressing P means that those who affirm not- P will “know only their own side of the case,” not- P will be “held as a dead dogma, not a living truth,” etc., which is bad.

C. Either way, suppressing P is bad.

is C sufficiently strong for Mill's purposes?

a complication: a third possibility

We have hitherto considered only two possibilities: that the received opinion may be false...; or that, the received opinion being true, a conflict with the opposite error is essential to a clear apprehension and deep feeling of its truth. But there is a commoner case than either of these; when the conflicting doctrines, instead of being one 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. (112)

Mill, John Stuart. From "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." Chapter 2 in *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Edited by David Bromwich and George Kateb. Yale University Press, 2003. © Yale University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Mill's second statement of the argument

"[1] We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavouring to stifle is a false opinion; and [2] if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still."

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"We can never be sure that the opinion ...is false"

An objection: "If we were never to act on our opinions, because those opinions may be wrong, we should leave all our interests uncared for...An objection which applies to all conduct, can be no valid objection to any conduct in particular...Men, and governments, must act to the best of their ability. There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life."

Mill, John Stuart. From "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." Chapter 2 in *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Edited by David Bromwich and George Kateb. Yale University Press, 2003. © Yale University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

"We can never be sure that the opinion ...is false"

Mill's reply: "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. Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion, is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for purposes of action."

Mill, John Stuart. From "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." Chapter 2 in *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Edited by David Bromwich and George Kateb. Yale University Press, 2003. © Yale University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Does this address the objection? How? Are you convinced?

5. “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” (97-8).

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Why does truth have a “real advantage” over falsity? A falsehood may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to believe it, etc.

knowledge

P2. Suppose P is false. Then suppressing P means that those who affirm not-P will “know only their own side of the case,” not-P will be “held as a dead dogma, not a living truth,” etc., which is bad.

Or, in the second version: “if we were sure [that P is false], stifling it would be an evil still.”

To evaluate these, some background on knowledge will be useful.

various kinds of knowledge

Brad knows that the Earth is round

factual, or propositional knowledge

← our focus

Jones knows where coffee is grown/why Venus is hot/who Rafael Reif is/...*

Justin knows how to juggle/how to tie his shoes

practical knowledge, or know-how

Quincy knows Cambridge

personal or acquaintance knowledge

*these also seem to be examples of factual knowledge

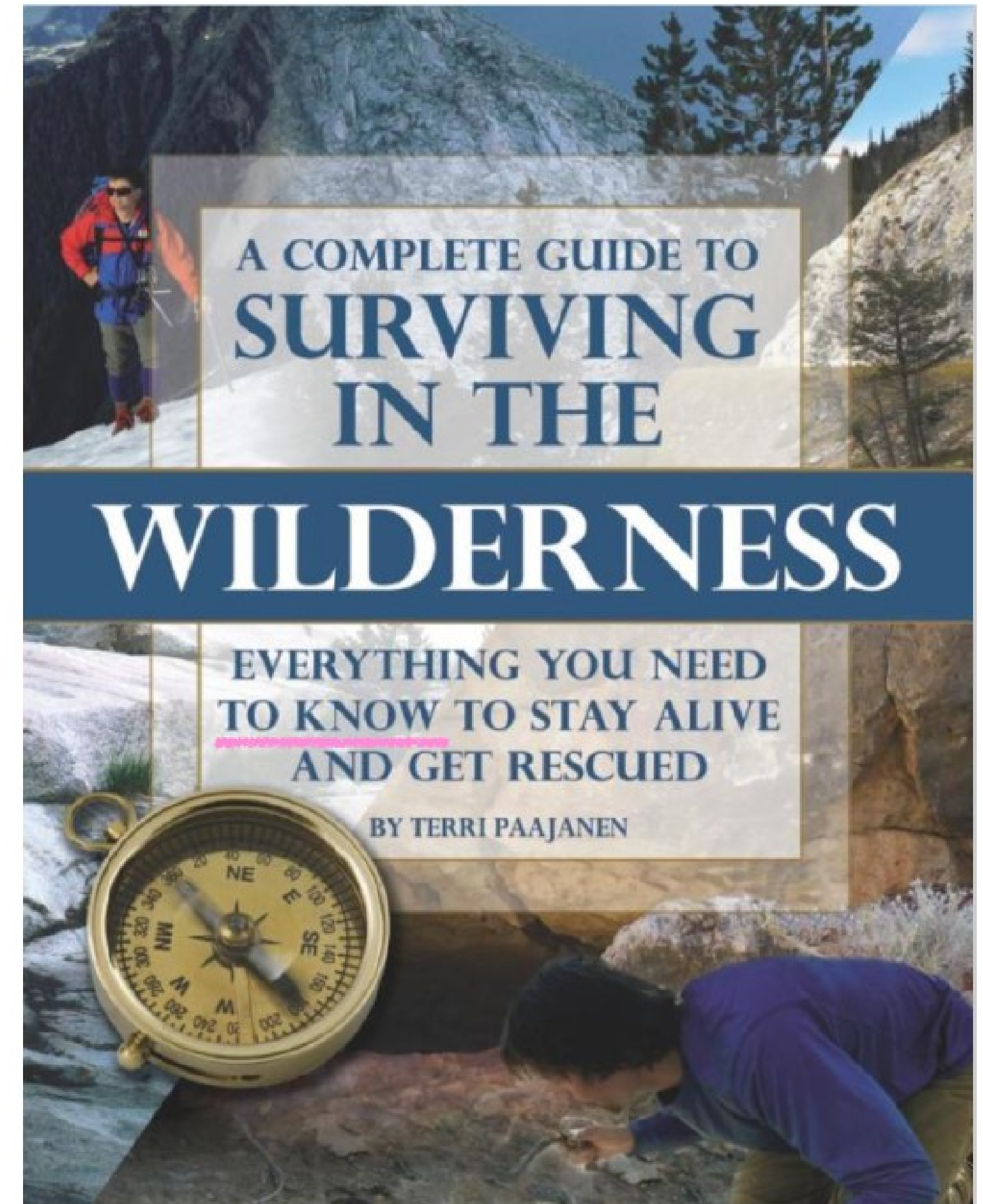
factual/propositional knowledge

factual knowledge is important

it's why we're here

it's useful

sometimes it can save your life



Paajanen, Terri. *A Complete Guide to Surviving in the Wilderness: Everything You Need to Know to Stay Alive and Get Rescued*. Atlantic Publishing Group, Inc., 2014. © Atlantic Publishing Group, Inc. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

is knowledge 'true opinion', or 'true belief'?

could knowledge just *be* true belief?

S knows P iff S truly believes P

?

no: one can believe something and be right by luck, in which case one does not know



Mill agrees

...assuming that the true opinion abides in the mind, but abides as a prejudice, a belief independent of, and proof against, argument—this is not the way in which truth ought to be held by a rational being. This is not knowing the truth. Truth, thus held, is but one superstition the more, accidentally clinging to the words which enunciate a truth. (103)

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what's so good about knowing, then?

suppose you want to get to Larissa

isn't having a *true belief* about the way to Larissa just as good as *knowing* the way to Larissa?

after all, won't you get to Larissa anyway?

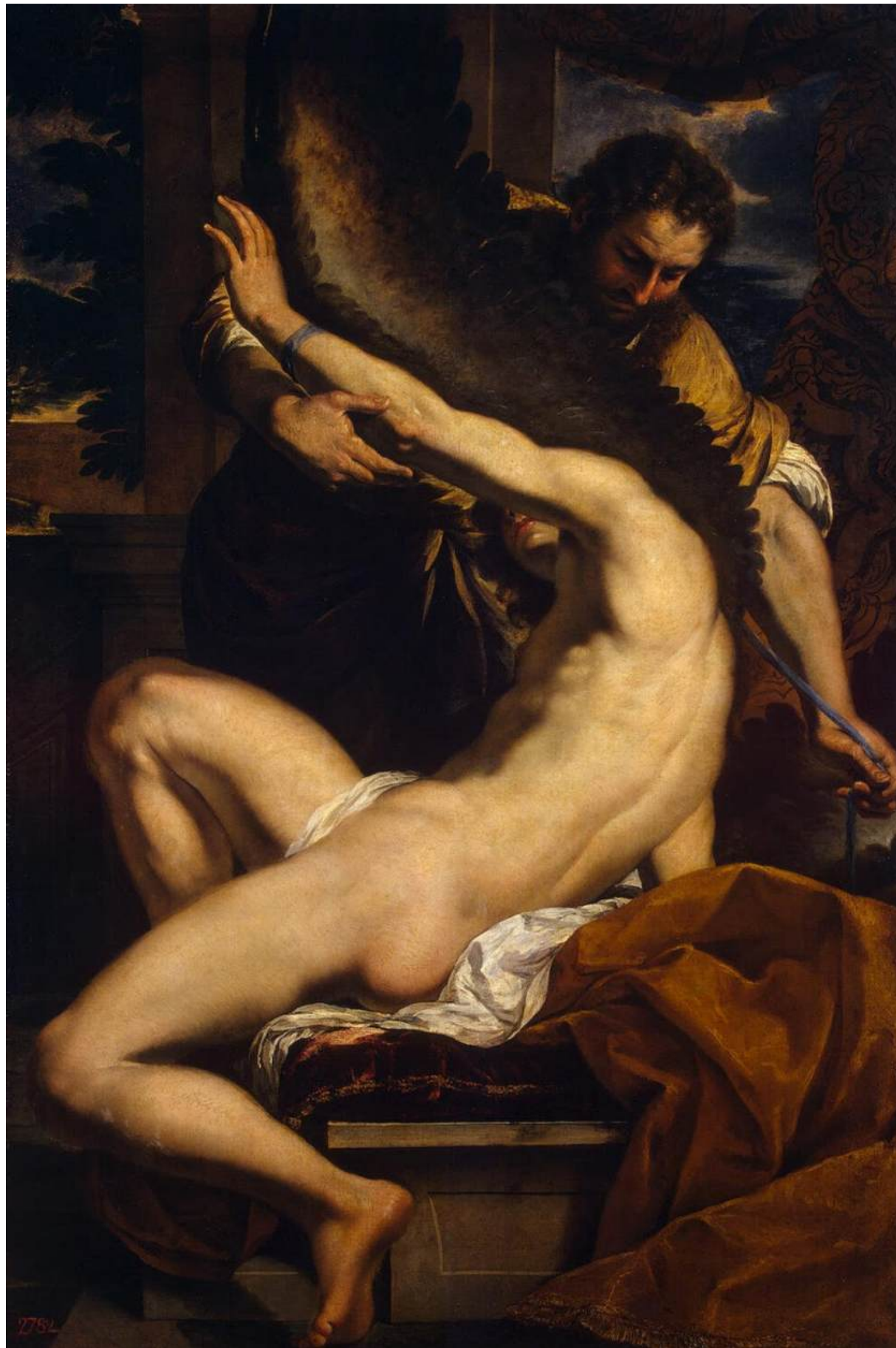
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Plato's answer

a tied-down statue made by Daedalus is stable, less likely to 'scamper away', than an untied one—this is why it's valuable

analogously, knowledge is more stable than true belief—this is why knowledge is valuable (more valuable than true belief)



Daedalus and Icarus by Charles Le Brun. This image is in the public domain. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Daedalus and Icarus

some (plausible) necessary conditions

if S knows P, then

(a) P is true

(b) S believes P

(c) S's belief is justified

these are **necessary conditions** for S to know P—are they also jointly **sufficient**?

NO

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hint:

one of the finest
clocks money can buy



the time is 11:56

Mill on knowledge / P2

P2. Suppose P is false. Then suppressing P means that those who affirm not-P will “know only their own side of the case,” not-P will be “held as a dead dogma, not a living truth,” etc., which is bad.

This is because...

Mill on knowledge / P2

He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form; he must feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of; else he will never really possess himself of the portion of truth which meets and removes that difficulty. Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men are in this condition; even of those who can argue fluently for their opinions. Their conclusion may be true, but it might be false for anything they know: they have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such persons may have to say; and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess. (104-5)

3. “He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that....if he is unable...to refute the reasons on the opposite side...he has no ground for preferring either opinion” (104). By this criterion, do most people know that the Earth is (roughly) spherical?

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an objection

“Okay, suppose we currently know P. Even if Mill is right, couldn't we suppress expression of not-P everywhere except in graduate seminars at Ivy League schools (and MIT)? Then the experts can attend, and continue knowing that P; and the rest of us can trust the experts.”

another objection

“If Mill is right, it can’t happen that everyone knows P. Once all dissenters have changed their mind, Mill’s **condition on knowledge** will not be met. But isn’t it absurd that knowledge by some requires error by others?”

another objection

Mill himself: 'But what! (it may be asked) Is the absence of unanimity an indispensable condition of true knowledge? Is it necessary that some part of mankind should persist in error, to enable any to realize the truth? ...

I affirm no such thing.' (110)

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What is his response?

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Fall 2023

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