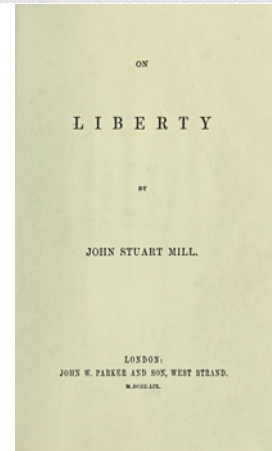


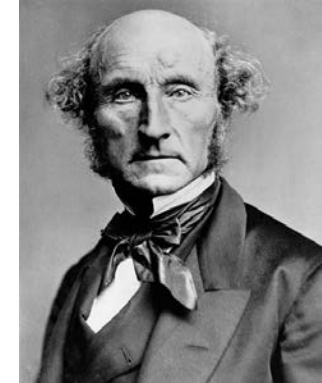
24.150 Liberalism, Toleration, and Freedom of Speech, Fall 2023

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John Stuart Mill wrap up



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2

Mill on knowledge / P2

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.

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...

3

4

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)

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/>.

5

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 P; and the rest of us can trust the experts.'

7

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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6

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?'

8

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)

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/>.

What is his response?

9



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10

The book's main theses

'there is a duty to reveal our evidence against social pressure, so long as the costs are not too high...you have a duty to speak your mind'

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11

This is a duty to your community: '...this constitutes doing your part to protect a common resource—namely, the epistemic commons.'

There is also a duty to yourself: 'you should speak your mind your own sake. Speaking your mind is an essential component of the good life.'

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12

Q1a. What is the 'epistemic commons'?

'the stock of facts, ideas, and perspectives that are alive in society's discourse.'

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Q1b. Can the epistemic commons of some society contain both a statement S and its negation, the statement not-S?

14

The dam example



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Abe, Beth, and Candice all know:

(R1) The dam is built with good materials.

(R2) The structural engineering is sound.

15



In addition:

Screenshot for "The most devastating and deadly dam failures" on YouTube.
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Abe knows (R3) that rainfall has been unusually high.

Beth knows (R4) the spillway design is defective.

Candice knows (R5) output pipe maintenance is bad.

Each believes that the dam will not break.

16

Knowing R1, R2, and only one of the rest *justifies believing* that the dam will not break.

Knowing all of R1-R5 justifies believing that the dam will break.

Joshi: A, B, and C's beliefs are 'rational,' 'But the group as a whole is irrational.'

17

An interpretation of the argument

P1. Sharing one's evidence makes it more likely that the beliefs of members of one's community constitute knowledge.

P2. If doing X makes it more likely that the beliefs of the members of one's community constitute knowledge, then one has a *prima facie* duty to do X.

C. One has a *prima facie* duty to share one's evidence.

19

Q2. What does Joshi mean by saying that we have 'a duty to speak our minds' (60)? Why does he think we have such a duty?

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The inefficacy objection

Speaking your mind presents a collective action problem. Each individual maximizes his narrow self-interest by not rocking the boat—that is, only sharing evidence where there is no social cost to doing so. But if everybody (or enough) people act in this way, then dangerous blind spots emerge. Everyone in the group would be better off if they all spoke their minds.

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Asch's conformity experiments

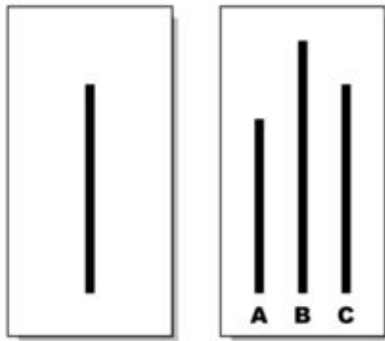


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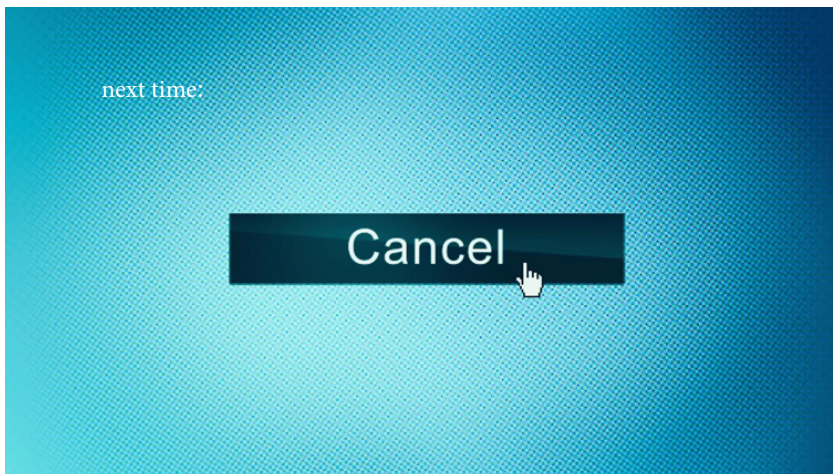
21



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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYlh4MkcFJA>

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