

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Sextus, Mill, and Open-Minded Inquiry: Confronting America's Epistemic Dilemma

MADISON LEE PHILLIPS  
SPRING 2024

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for baccalaureate degrees  
in Political Science and Philosophy  
with honors in Philosophy

Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Christopher Moore  
Associate Professor of Philosophy and Classics  
Thesis Supervisor

Brady Bowman  
Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Honors Advisor

\* Electronic approvals are on file.

## ABSTRACT

What if we viewed disagreement as a positive force, instead of a negative one? In today's socio-political culture, disagreement is approached with caution, and opposing views are often ignored. These conversational tendencies encourage a lack of comprehensive and open-minded inquiry when a person searches for opinions and information to gain knowledge on a topic. Based on who those people associate with, what groups they are a part of, and where they get their news from, these individuals can have completely different understandings of the world. When we can't agree on the mere facts of a situation, disagreement and frustration are bound to occur. This appears to be an increasingly prevalent issue in American politics: disagreeing about what is *really* happening. When social media, along with its algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers of information, plays a part in this epistemic issue, the problem is exacerbated. These problems of individual inquiry affect not only politics and government, but also daily social interactions. Because these negative effects of closed-minded inquiry pervade peoples' lives, the following thesis investigates how certain philosophical arguments could improve the closed-minded nature of our current socio-political culture in the United States. Two key philosophers provide answers on the best methods of inquiry: Sextus Empiricus and John Stuart Mill.

Sextus Empiricus' writings on the ancient skeptic's way of life describe a method of information-gathering that is both comprehensive and open-minded; many opinions should be considered from a range of perspectives. John Stuart Mill emphasizes the importance of hearing dissenting views while engaging in this method of inquiry. After discussing my theoretical inquiries into both Sextus' and Mill's philosophies, I explain how the Internet problematizes both of their arguments. Finally, I provide practical examples and applications of the methods and values of open-minded inquiry.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
Introduction.....	1
Hearing All Sides .....	4
The Necessity of Dissent .....	15
The Internet Problem .....	24
Seeing Past the Political Enemy .....	32
10 Steps to Keeping an Open Mind .....	41
Conclusion .....	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	44

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 1. "I hope you find the courage to say..." ..... 8

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This honors thesis is the culmination of the past four years of my intellectual, academic, and personal discovery at Penn State. Without the sacrifices made by my parents, Stephanie and Ralph Phillips, these four years of discovery would not have been possible. Thank you, mom and dad, for your unwavering support in my pursuits.

Many suggestions from and discussions with my sibling Morgan have shaped this thesis. Thank you, Morgan, for your suggestions, encouragement, and listening ear.

Thank you to my honors adviser, Brady Bowman. I am grateful for your advice and support throughout this research and writing process.

Lastly, my gratitude goes to my thesis supervisor, Christopher Moore, who has provided me with amazing advice, discussions, and encouragement. Thank you for all the philosophizing, Professor Moore!

## Introduction

*“The only true voyage of discovery, ... would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is...”*

*– Marcel Proust*

In recent years, the ancient philosophical teachings of the Stoics have risen in popularity. From social media accounts, for example “The Daily Stoic” on Instagram, to self-help literature, *The Daily Stoic: 366 Meditations on Wisdom, Perseverance, and the Art of Living*, Stoicism has been absorbed into mainstream personal philosophy culture. These models provide people today with an updated, practical version of the Stoic way of life. The teachings of the ancient skeptics provide a similarly beneficial personal philosophy that can be adapted to meet the challenges of the modern day; however, the ancient skeptics have not received the same attention the Stoics have. Ancient skepticism, approached through a lens of personal discovery and communication, provides a way of life committed to open-minded inquiry that is especially valuable in this current age of polarization and disinformation. Writing in the 2nd century CE, Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* provides the fullest account of the personal benefits and practices of Pyrrhonism — ancient skepticism. Put briefly, the ancient skeptic is described as a person who feels puzzled about an issue, listens to many arguments from all sides of the issue, and then chooses to withhold judgment to achieve a state of mental tranquility. Instead of taking this practice so literally – withholding judgment on absolutely anything – I argue that ancient skepticism’s practices can be interpreted in a way which allows for an individual to foster an

openness to inquiry and opposition. At the same time, the ancient skeptics' practices are enhanced when practiced alongside the lessons from John Stuart Mill.

John Stuart Mill provides similar open-minded inquiry practices as the ancient skeptics, but on a more collective level. With the emergence of democracies in the 19th century, John Stuart Mill's ideas in *On Liberty* explore the necessity of listening to dissenting voices in these new forms of government, so as to preserve free speech and prevent mass conformity in thought. Both ancient skepticism and the work of John Stuart Mill approach similar goals of embracing dissenting opinions, exposing oneself to all sides of an argument, and gaining knowledge through intentional epistemological discovery. In this way, the philosophies of Sextus Empiricus and John Stuart Mill, though separated by roughly 17 centuries, have a synergistic quality when practiced simultaneously and examined through a framework of civil disagreement.

While ancient skepticism places the epistemic burden on the individual, Mill's writing places the burden on the collective. Such approaches to gaining knowledge and engaging with dissenting views are not mutually exclusive, and, when practiced simultaneously, can produce a more sustainable arena of civil discourse which approaches disagreement in a productive manner. These philosophies provide a potential remedy to the current political polarization and hyper-partisanship which pervades American sociopolitical culture. Right now, we view disagreement as the end of the road; nothing good can come from it. But what if we, as a culture, viewed disagreement as a pathway to discovery? What if we valued the arguments of those with different opinions from us just as much as we valued the opinions of those on our side

Beginning with a theoretical inquiry into ancient skepticism, I explore the writings of Sextus Empiricus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, as well as a contemporary interpretation of ancient skepticism provided by Nicholas Tampio in an essay for *Aeon*. I also include my own interpretations of the ancient skeptic's argumentative strategies that could be used by people

today. Next, I analyze John Stuart Mill's argument for dissent in *On Liberty*, and a contemporary interpretation of Mill's argument by Cass Sunstein in *Why Societies Need Dissent*. I then display the synergistic relationship between ancient skepticism's practices and John Stuart Mill's dissent argument, followed by the problem they both encounter with the Internet, disinformation, and censorship. Providing practical applications at varying levels, I then show how the lessons from the ancient skeptics' and John Stuart Mill's philosophies are already in practice today.

Combining the lessons from these important thinkers through practical applications displays the strengths they have in cultivating productive conversations, which could ease the polarized tension present in society today. Finally, a 10-step guide provides readers with strategic practices they can use in their daily lives to implement the philosophies in support of open-minded inquiry outlined in this paper.

To productively engage in civil discourse, a shared commitment to open-minded inquiry is necessary. For some people, this commitment will require seeing opposition with other eyes.



## Hearing All Sides

### Ancient Skepticism and Open-Minded Inquiry

*“Great doubts, deep wisdom; small doubts, little wisdom.”*

*– Chinese proverb*

Bombarded with the polarization and tribalism which pervades not just news and media, but also social interactions, it is easy to pick one side of an argument and stick with it, blocking out any counterarguments. The not-so-easy task lies in extending one’s conversational habits and news intake beyond preferred belief systems and into an opponent’s arguments and reasoning. And it is even more difficult to consider whether the other side’s argument could be true or beneficial and that your own belief could be wrong. In a socio-political landscape characterized by partisan fervor and extreme dogmatism, this style of wide-reaching knowledge acquisition is not the norm. People with strong opinions who pick sides are rewarded with that group’s support, whereas those who have more reluctant or moderate attitudes and remain open to all sides are left without a rallying party behind them. This tribalism behavior is reinforced by the two-party system in the United States which currently provides little incentive to think across party lines. Additionally, algorithms online only reinforce a person’s preferred beliefs (Liu et al.).

A mindset of openness and detachment could prove to mitigate these problems caused by political polarization and hyper-partisanship. The personal practices laid out in Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* provide the way of life of the ancient Pyrrhonian skeptic, a person who, among other things, approached inquiry in an open-minded manner. Reading Sextus in a “critical, yet sympathetic spirit,” as Richard Bett suggests in his essay “Minds wide open”

describing his new book, allows for the adoption of ancient skepticism into modern practice. From this, Bett argues that the key lesson we can learn from Sextus in the modern day is the importance of “open-minded inquiry.” Nicholas Tampio, in an essay for *Aeon*, provides a contiguous argument for the adoption of ancient skepticism’s practices into the modern day. In this essay, Tampio discusses the benefits of “intellectual humility,” the virtue of knowing you could be wrong, and acting accordingly. In this chapter, I will further explore the interpretations of Sextus and ancient skepticism made by Tampio, while also providing my own interpretations and applications using the ancient skeptic’s “Modes” provided by Sextus in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*.

What is lost when a person stops asking questions, when their capacity to doubt is lost? What is lost when a person is too deeply committed to their beliefs, to the point where any openness to changing their mind is lost? Someone who lacks this openness to changing their mind loses out on just that – changing their mind. Perhaps a person has a strong belief about climate change. They think it is not human-caused, and they will not listen to any arguments in support of the opposite. Of course, climate change is human-caused and there exist years of science-backed research to prove it. If only this person read one article with an open mind, perhaps they might change their view, or just open to the idea that their view is not as strong as they thought. Instead, they live in this state of dogmatism, where it is their belief or nothing at all. And so, they prevent themselves from expanding their awareness of the world they live in, and their actions and decisions reflect this limited awareness. In contrast, for example, someone could be open to multiple perspectives on the issue of shifting to renewable energy. They experience a bit of turmoil, however, when they realize there seems to be valid arguments on all sides of the issue, and they are not sure which argument is right. This second person is who the ancient skeptics are concerned with. At this point, the ancient skeptic’s practice of withholding

judgment is useful, as their main goal was to achieve ataraxia, or mental tranquility. They were able to do this by following a certain pattern which Sextus lays out in *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*:

Men of noble nature had been disturbed at the irregularity in things, and puzzled as to where they should place their belief. Thus they were led on to investigate both truth and falsehood in things, in order that, when truth and falsehood were determined, they might attain tranquility of mind. Now, the principle fundamental to the existence of Scepticism is the proposition, 'To every argument an equal argument is opposed,' for we believe that it is in consequence of this principle that we are brought to a point where we cease to dogmatize. (PH, 35)

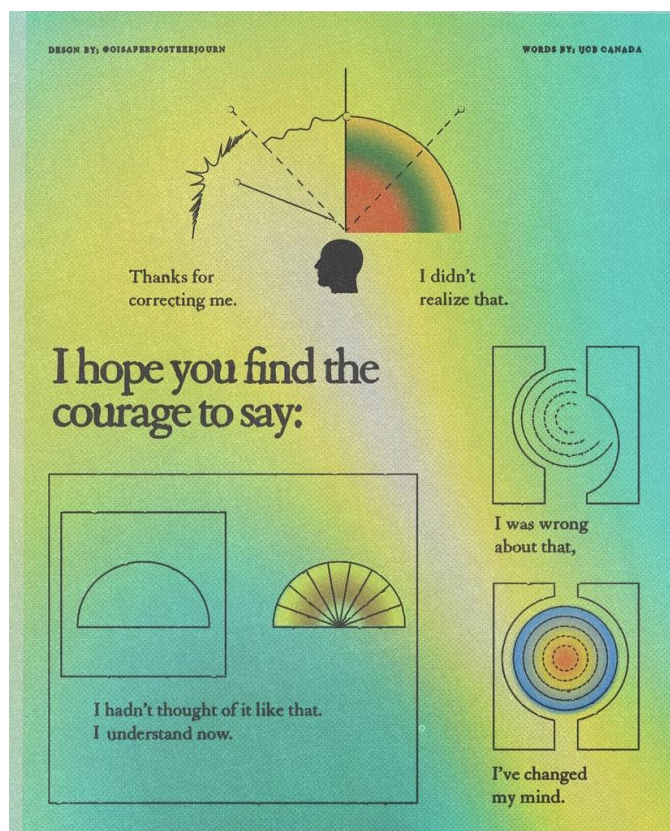
In other words, a person feels puzzled about something, seeks out arguments from all sides, and once they realize there is not a sufficient argument to convince them from any side, the Pyrrhonian method of withholding judgment steps in. When that person accepts that there might not be an answer, they release the need to dogmatize, and their judgment is withheld on the matter. And in withholding judgment, they are supposed to experience mental tranquility. While this mental tranquility is important, it is not my focus. What is particularly helpful from the ancient skeptic's practice is the act of searching and examining as many perspectives on the same issue as possible. This open-minded inquiry can improve the problems of groupthink and conformity that people are experiencing today.

Considering the practicality of this process, if a person is too deeply entrenched in their beliefs, this task seems nearly impossible. But, what if the processes of searching, examining, and doubting, all essential to the lifestyle of an ancient skeptic, were more common in today's culture? This life of the ancient skeptic can appear to be that of self-deception or detachment from reality, because it requires a person letting go of absolute certainty. And with the abundance of research and knowledge in the world, there do seem to be many things we can be sure of. This extremely literal understanding of ancient skepticism is why the approach that Richard Bett lays out in his article "Minds wide open" is so useful in bringing ancient skepticism's practices to bear on the modern day. Bett describes how ancient skepticism should

be explored through a “critical, yet sympathetic” approach. The ancient skeptic lifestyle shows us how it can be useful to question one’s beliefs and assumptions consistently by hearing as many arguments on a topic as possible. From this, he argues that open-mindedness is “the lesson... we can gain from Sextus’ approach if we adapt it to the twenty-first century” (Bett). This approach, which I adopt in my analysis of Sextus’ writings, allows for an interpretation which focuses more on the epistemological benefits of the practices of the ancient skeptics, and less on the metaphysical interpretations of their way of life. In other words, I will be employing the personal practices for gathering information that the ancient skeptics utilized, instead of focusing on their practices with the intention of questioning what exists in the world.

In his essay “Scepticism as a Way of Life” for *Aeon*, Nicholas Tampio describes the benefits of adopting ancient skepticism through a lifestyle approach like that of Richard Bett. Tampio writes that “scepticism is not simply about knowledge or language. It is a way of life. Sextus invites you to become an open-minded, calm person who seeks out knowledge but does not become angry when certainty eludes your grasp or when others don’t see things the same way” (Tampio). Through this practice, one embraces a kind of virtue, which Tampio refers to as intellectual humility. He goes on to describe why this is important to the practice of ancient skepticism because the “sceptics think that part of being intellectually honest is admitting the limits and flaws of one’s knowledge” (Tampio). Intellectual humility requires both an acknowledgment that no one, including oneself, can know everything, and that what a person might think they know a lot about, they may be very wrong about. It requires an openness to the reality that, as Tampio describes, “you’ve been wrong before; you could be wrong now.” (Tampio). This openness to being wrong or changing one’s mind – intellectual humility – is not groundbreaking. In fact, it is appearing in different formats across social media. For example, in Figure 1, an art piece from Instagram user @oisferposterjourn depicts some phrases a person

can employ when they are open to different perspectives and potentially changing their mind on a topic.



**Figure 1. "I hope you find the courage to say..."**

This is not an easy virtue in practice, however, and requires a consistent commitment to listening to arguments from as many viewpoints as possible. In the face of the current state of news and social media, however, this virtue is becoming increasingly necessary. Tampio discusses an applied aspect of ancient skepticism in regard to news media. He discusses how “one reason that it is important to read Sextus now is because people are considering proposals to tamper free speech in the name of combating post-truth politics” (Tampio). Through the lens of ancient skepticism, the problem with censoring fake news is the possibility that the news contains some semblance of the truth, and by censoring this news, a person or entity is claiming

to speak for the truth. Tampio explains how “the sceptical tradition poses a recurrent challenge to anybody who claims to censor in the name of the reality-based community or objective truth. The sceptical tradition gives us reason to have doubts about anybody who speaks for the truth” (Tampio). While this skeptical commitment to hearing all sides is an important one, Tampio's argument, supported by ancient skepticism, is complicated by the abundance of disinformation in news media today. How would Sextus and the skeptics respond to the arguments for and against censorship on social media today?

The problem here is that some “fake news” is very difficult to distinguish from regular news. This can be intentional, which comes in the form of disinformation and misinformation. Both kinds of information are spread by people who intentionally mislead others. Additionally, though, the “fake news” could be spread unintentionally. In this vein, the burden is placed on the listener. They either have the critical thinking skills to hear this news and question its validity, or they do not, and so they accept that news to be true. In the public sphere, newsgatherers must be equipped with the critical thinking capacities that are required to distinguish between real and fake news. Such situations complicate Tampio's argument in support of ancient skepticism's use regarding free speech, because it seems that there may be times when it is valuable to censor something; for example, a post on social media that contains disinformation, where the user who posted it intended for it to be taken as truth. I further explore these complications in the following chapter on the problem of the Internet. In this section, I will instead build off Tampio's broader argument: ancient skepticism's practice of open-minded inquiry can be cultivated today to counteract one's ideological biases and dogmatic tendencies.

For example, a person could notice that they have a strong belief, but they are not exactly sure why they believe it. That person could, then, begin to seek out counterarguments and arguments with different reasoning than their own. Based on new perspectives gathered, the

person could conclude that their original belief does not align with their values, or that they still hold their original belief but for different reasons than previously thought. Regardless, this person came to this conclusion by seeking out more information than needed to simply confirm their opinion. They approached a topic with an open mind, and, perhaps, this act of discovery allowed them to feel more at peace with the belief they have or learn something new about a topic they typically would not have interacted with. This is important and helpful because this process allows that individual to better understand themselves and why they believe what they believe, instead of just holding a strong belief because it is what their parents or coworkers, for example, believe. Today, this could look like a regular Fox News viewer engaging in opposing-ideology or non-ideological news and media. A recent study found that engaging with “cross-cutting” media allowed regular Fox News viewers to learn more than they typically would have, expand their knowledge on an issue, and moderate their attitudes (Broockman & Kalla, 2). By expanding their news intake to include the other side of a topic, the participants in this study found that their attitudes changed. This is just one example of how a person could adopt ancient skepticism’s practices into their life. Another set of options is provided by Sextus in “The Sceptic Formulae.”

In *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus lays out various methods of using ancient skepticism’s practices in daily conversation. Some of these methods are contained in “The Sceptic Formulae.” These nine expressions, according to Sextus, are “indicative of the Sceptic attitude and of our state of mind” (PH, 78). These phrases provide more practical expressions that can be said out loud, amidst the arguments and counterarguments one faces, to suspend judgment. What would it look like if a person today implemented these expressions for withholding judgment and remaining open-minded? What follows are my interpretations of some of Sextus’ Sceptic

Formulae and how a person today could use these phrases to deploy ancient skepticism's practices into their life.

### ***“Not More”***

When faced with equally convincing arguments on a topic of importance, it is easy to feel that picking a side is necessary. And this feeling is intensified by a sociopolitical climate that tends to combine one's political views, ideological tendencies, and personality all into one. The pressure to give an immediate answer in a conversation surrounding a political topic is intense for some people, because that answer determines who they are in the eyes of others. For example, a person who leans toward a conservative ideology, in a conversation with other conservative-minded people, might feel that they must give an extreme answer in opposition to a bill helping people who are seeking abortions out-of-state, even though they may not have any knowledge of the bill itself. The skeptic in this situation, however, would recall that a key formula can be spoken to prevent this pressure to dogmatize. By speaking “not more” the ancient skeptic means “one thing not more than another” (PH, 79). So, one argument or belief is not more convincing or strong than the other. An ancient skeptic uses this phrase to avoid assenting to one belief or another before gathering more information on all sides of the issue. A person could utilize this today, perhaps in a conversation where they wish to gain more research and evidence before adhering to a certain side. They could say, for example, “at this time, I do not feel convinced by one argument more than the other.”

### ***“Non-Assertion”***

To declare one's skeptical attitude, Sextus presents the mindset of non-assertion. He explains that “non-assertion is a state of mind we are in, in consequence of which we declare that



we neither affirm nor deny anything” (PH, 81). Using the “critical, yet sympathetic” approach from Richard Bett, this mindset of non-assertion could be interpreted to declare one’s lack of knowledge on an issue, preventing them from declaring a certain side of the issue they are on. By living one’s life in this state of non-assertion, the demand from others to pick a side and stick with it eases. In maintaining this state of mind, a person can free themselves from the pressure to always know exactly what they believe and do not believe about every issue. This mindset allows that person to take the time to research and listen to all sides of an argument, as Sextus and the Pyrrhonists advocate for. A person who feels unsure of an issue, when faced with a question asking what they believe, could say: “I do not have enough information yet to have an opinion.”

### ***“Perhaps” and “It Is Possible”***

But what if someone is unrelenting in gathering your opinion on a matter? They want you to say *something* in response to their questioning. Sextus provides a pair of phrases as a solution for this case. He explains that “a person, for instance who says, ‘perhaps it is,’ by not stating positively that it is, affirms implicitly also the seemingly conflicting statement ‘perhaps it is not.’ And the same applies also to the other formulae” (PH, 82). Without having done any research or reading any information on a topic, it is easy to just agree with someone who you typically would agree with. For example, say a person is watching a politician they favor on television. That politician gives a statement on a topic this person does not know anything about. Later that day, this topic comes up in a conversation, and this person is asked if they think that topic is true. Instead of giving the answer the politician did, this person could say “it is possible,” which also implies the inverse – it is not possible. This statement allows them to give an answer, without having to assent to a particular side before they conduct more research on that topic.

One limitation of ancient skepticism is that their way of life seems limited to those in search of the truth. Sextus was writing for people who wanted to acquire knowledge; people who had a hunger for knowledge. When these individuals develop an understanding of an issue, they might, knowingly or unknowingly, begin to dogmatize. If they start to hold onto their understanding as dogma, then those individuals might miss out on an equally appealing view. However, when they allow themselves to really consider all sides of that issue, then they can become stuck. If all the sides have equally convincing arguments, then which one should they pick? This is where Sextus advises to withhold judgment, which leads to mental tranquility. But, what about people who think they already know everything; people who think they have nothing to learn? How would Sextus approach these people to at least listen to his advice? At first, my answer to this question was simple: Sextus has nothing to say to these people. His ideas were aimed at individuals who want to know as much as they can. However, people who do not have these truth-seeking values are the ones who could most benefit from an improvement of their knowledge-forming methods. So, perhaps, Sextus would advise them that one advantage to hearing opposing arguments is that these arguments have the potential to strengthen the argument the individual already holds. In hearing counterarguments, one can prepare a response to these counterarguments. This is similar to a suggestion John Stuart Mill gives in his writing in support of dissent in *On Liberty*. In the following chapter, I explore Mill's reasoning in support of dissent, which provides more support for open-minded inquiry that Sextus and the ancient skeptics do not provide.

As citizens in a democratic government accustomed to a two-party system, it seems that there is always going to be some kind of dispute. And that dispute is typically going to have two starkly opposing sides to it – two tribes. This is unavoidable given this system of governance. However, the extreme nature of this polarization and tribalism can be mitigated. The practices

and teachings of the ancient skeptics are an example of how, by remaining open to all sides of an argument, a person can take a more peaceful and calm approach to a discussion, while also learning more about the topic at hand. Additionally, becoming comfortable with not always having a concrete answer allows inquirers to learn more about a topic in a comprehensive way, because they are not seeking to immediately confirm their own opinion. If we are not all trying to get as much information as we can about a topic, it will become even more difficult to have a conversation that leads to consensus. While ancient skepticism provides a more personal approach to open-minded inquiry, John Stuart Mill's writings on free speech and dissent provide a more collective approach to that form of information-gathering. In the next chapter, I discuss the work of John Stuart Mill in support of free speech and dissent.

## The Necessity of Dissent

### John Stuart Mill and Open-Minded Inquiry

*“Where all think alike no one thinks very much.”*

– *Walter Lippmann*

In one of his most important works, *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill discusses the necessity of dissent to a democracy in his famous argument commonly known as the “marketplace of ideas.” Mill claims that a democratic society must listen to voices of opposition, no matter how ridiculous or false they may be, because those dissenting opinions might hold a piece of the truth. Through this process, Mill argues that the opposing view will either inform listeners of something true or allow the other opinions to be strengthened by pointing out the opposing view’s falsity. This process, then, aids a group or society in getting closer to a collective agreement on the truth of something. And, furthermore, Mill believes that there is no other way an individual can claim knowledge on a topic in any other process.

In his book *Why Societies Need Dissent*, Cass Sunstein builds on Mill’s arguments in support of dissent to explain how easy, yet dangerous, it can be when a society does not establish Mill’s truth-seeking processes – what Sunstein calls a “culture of free speech.” Sunstein argues that a culture of free speech consists of people who are open to hearing all sides of an issue, and who do not silence dissenting opinions. In making this claim, Sunstein focuses more on the psychological benefits a group experiences when hearing all sides and withholding silencing dissenting opinions. Throughout the book, he discusses the importance of either being a voice of dissent, or amplifying the voice of someone else who is. Hearing opposing views is how societies prevent “cascade effects,” which is the term Sunstein uses to describe the occurrence of

people who do not have their own, independent reasons for believing in a majority's view. This is similar to what Mill described as the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion" (Mill, 9). Because of these cascades, Sunstein discusses a major problem he sees developing in humans' abilities to gather information, which he calls a "crippled epistemology." This refers to a state of being where a person does not have the means to obtain, or does not even try to obtain, knowledge through a comprehensive and open-minded process. Rather, this person's beliefs are made up of and reinforced by the ideas of the groups they surround themselves with. A person with a crippled epistemology, then, only believes in something because it is what everyone else in their group believes in – a key consequence of cascades.

Gathering information in a comprehensive way is essential to the success of what Mill and Sunstein both argue for: that there is never a time when it is beneficial to a society to deliberately bar any kind of information from the public sphere. With the prevalence of news on social media, however, this argument is not as simple as it may seem. Algorithms provide an echo chamber of information, making it easy for a person to enter a "crippled epistemology." Disinformation and misinformation can easily be mistaken for accurate information. Political polarization and tribalism create informational cascades, in which groups ascribe to shared beliefs only because those beliefs are the majority belief in that group. In all these situations, dissent is nonexistent. For these reasons, I will discuss the arguments in support of dissent made by Mill and Sunstein to show they could improve the socio-political culture in the United States. I will lay out Mill's arguments in support of dissent, Sunstein's arguments building off Mill, and how I see the implementation of their ideas improving the current state of civil discourse in America. I will also highlight how their philosophies cohere with that of the ancient skeptics to form a more complete approach to my open-minded inquiry argument.

In his second chapter of *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill discusses “the liberty of thought and discussion.” At the time, Mill was concerned with the power a majority opinion could hold over a society or government. He did not think that one person’s opinion should be silenced any more than a large group’s opinion should be. Mill explains his reasoning behind this concern: “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, 18). So, for Mill, an opinion should not be silenced based on its number of supporters. This is just one of his reasons why dissenting opinions should be heard. He also thought that most people think they know something, when they really do not. Similar to the ancient skeptics, Mill was wary of anyone who claimed to speak for the truth. Because of this worry, he provided a detailed process of examination for anyone who claimed knowledge of the truth. A person whose opinion was deserving of confidence, according to Mill, was deserving of that sureness if they came to the conclusion through the following exercises of inquiry:

...Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct. Because it has been his practice to listen to all that could be said against him; to profit by as much of it as was just, and expound to himself, and upon occasion to others, the fallacy of what was fallacious. Because he has felt that the only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. (Mill, 22)

By remaining open to critique, listening to as many opinions on the issue as possible, and approaching the issue from different perspectives, an individual can claim to have knowledge of something, according to Mill. For Mill, this process was the only way a human being could have “any rational assurance of being right” (Mill, 21). This is how Mill believed truth-seeking and information-gathering should be conducted. Mill goes on to claim that “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” (Mill, 21). So, according to Mill, a person can be confident in their opinion only if it has withstood arguments from all other sides of the issue. Mill emphasized this kind of comprehensive epistemological discovery because he feared the power a majority opinion could hold over a society and a democracy. He recognized that tyranny of the majority applied not just to politics but also to social interactions; and he wanted to prevent both. Mill explains that “there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them...” (Mill, 9). He recognized that social pressure can easily lead to conformity in thought, and this was dangerous. To prevent “the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling,” Mill argued that the solution was welcoming all forms of dissent. However, he recognized that this was not a perfect solution. Of course, the concept had its flaws. Mill explains:

I do not pretend that the most unlimited use of the freedom of enunciating all possible opinions would put an end to the evils of religious or philosophical sectarianism. Every truth which men of narrow capacity are in earnest about, is sure to be asserted, inculcated, and in many ways even acted on, as if no other truth existed in the world, or at all events none that could limit or qualify the first. I acknowledge that the tendency of all opinions to become sectarian is not cured by the freest discussion, but is often heightened and exacerbated thereby; the truth which ought to have been, but was not, seen, being rejected all the more violently because proclaimed by persons regarded as opponents. (Mill, 49)

Mill’s discussion on the limits of his argument seems particularly poignant in the face of the state of civil discourse in America today. When faced with arguments of opposition, tensions seem to flare even more. The tensions seem caused by, not so much the content of the opposing side’s argument, but the simple fact that the argument is coming from the *other* team. In other words, the mindset seems to be that if this person is a Republican, then it does not matter what they say, I am not going to listen to them because I am a

Democrat, and vice versa. There is a felt reluctance to listen to what “the other side” has to say about an issue.

However, Mill does not think this problem of inflaming arguments disproves the positive effects of his argument. He believes that the “impassioned partisan” is not as important as the “more disinterested bystander.” Because the bystander is forced to listen to both sides when two people or groups are arguing, “this collision of opinions works its salutary effect” (Mill, 49). For Mill, truth is a social process; it requires a collective approach to gathering information. This approach takes shape when an individual lives in a society that does not aim to reinforce their bias. Instead, the individual hears manysides of an argument, and is open to changing their mind. It is worth noting that the personal practices of the ancient skeptic laid out in the previous chapter, then, would support Mill’s ideal scenario in which individuals approach gathering information in a comprehensive manner.

Mill makes some key assumptions to develop his argument that truly understanding something requires multiple views. His argument rests on an assumption that all people in society share a common goal of reaching a consensus. Because Mill assumes this shared consensus-reaching goal, he also assumes that people are rational and will be open to hearing other opinions. This assumption strengthens his argument that all opinions should be heard because they might contain some form of the truth. When contrasted with the current state of politics and news media, it does not seem that consensus is uniformly the goal, however. The goal of disinformation is to intentionally mislead, which seems opposite to this principle of consensus. And sometimes the goal is also to cause outrage and attract media attention. Mill also assumes that people with false beliefs will be open to abandoning those beliefs. In this way, he assumes a certain rationality among humans. Again, in this current era of polarization, this rationality does not seem to be present, at



first glance. In the following chapter, however, I discuss an experiment in deliberative democracy which seems to prove otherwise: that Americans are open to, and capable of, discussing and changing their views on issues for which they at first have strong opinions (Fishkin).

Cass Sunstein, in his book *Why Societies Need Dissent*, discusses what happens when this style of open-minded and comprehensive inquiry is not present, resulting in what he calls a person with a “crippled epistemology.” His main argument concerns the lesson that “organizations and nations are far more likely to prosper if they welcome dissent and promote openness” (Sunstein, 210). Sunstein approaches his answer to the problem of knowledge-formation from a social sciences standpoint. To support his argument, Sunstein explores three key barriers to dissent and openness in societies: conformity, cascades, and group polarization. Sunstein argues that crippled epistemologies pose great danger to democracies and cultures of free speech. He explains this concept of crippled epistemology:

Terrorists frequently suffer from a crippled epistemology: they learn very little, and what they do learn reinforces a sick and sharply constrained set of lessons about the past, present, and future. But terrorists are not the only ones whose epistemology is crippled; this is a problem afflicting millions of people all over the world. (Sunstein, 109)

As a result of algorithms, and now the presence of artificial intelligence, an individual who gets their news online is afflicted by some level of crippled epistemology. Their preferences are picked up by algorithms, and they can easily become trapped in a “filter bubble,” which over-exposes users “to ideas that conform with their preexisting perceptions and beliefs” (Liu et al., 3791). Filter bubbles, then, prevent dissenting voices from reaching a user at all. Because of this, algorithms and filter bubbles work against a culture of free speech. Additionally, they promote conformity in thought. When compared to the dangers of social pressure that Mill discussed in *On Liberty*, it becomes apparent how pertinent Mill’s argument is to today’s socio-political

culture. Perhaps, even more so because of the emergence of “cancel culture,” in which a person is completely shamed by society because of a shared conviction that they are a bad person.

Without a public forum where all sides of an opinion can be heard and contested, one side of an issue can easily become the only side of an issue for someone, and “cancel culture” exemplifies this.

On top of this, there is a lack of openness to hearing the other sides of an issue in the first place. When people do not view consensus as a goal, then listening to the other sides of an issue becomes unnecessary. This is another problem afflicting the sociopolitical culture of the United States, and it results in catastrophic moments such as the January 6 Capitol Riot. Because the participants’ views were reinforced by filter bubbles online, resulting in a lack of hearing opposing views on the issue, they acted accordingly. The January 6 Capitol Riot is an example of the extremes some people will go to when they are not faced with opposing arguments. Sunstein states that “free societies depend on a high degree of receptivity, in which many perspectives are heard and in which dissent and disagreement are not unwelcome” (Sunstein, 109). For him, the culture of free speech is just as important as the laws of free speech. Sunstein clarifies that “a well-functioning democracy has a *culture* of free speech, not simply legal protection of free speech. It encourages independence of mind. ... In a culture of free speech, the attitude of listeners is no less important than that of speakers” (Sunstein, 110). This attitude that Sunstein describes is critical to the success of a culture of free speech. And it is an attitude that is not expected in civil discourse in the United States today. Both sides must be good listeners. Sunstein goes on to say that “in a well-functioning democracy, the right to free speech certainly protects dissenters, but it cannot do what it is supposed to do unless listeners are willing to give dissenters a respectful hearing” (Sunstein, 212). Additionally, dissenters must provide a similar respectful hearing. Both sides of a conversation must be open to arguments from others, whether

or not those arguments support their belief. This is where it becomes beneficial to practice the personal open-mindedness practices that the ancient skeptics employed. By hearing all sides of an argument, while also maintaining a sense of humility that their opinion may be wrong, a person welcomes dissent in the way that Mill and Sunstein argue for. Because, in this way, a person can engage in civil discourse with an open mind, and expect that their opinion, whether it is of the majority or not, will be heard respectfully. Where ancient skepticism provides a more individualistic lifestyle approach to open-minded inquiry, the lessons from John Stuart Mill display the importance of a collective approach to this mindset of receptive inquiry. Both philosophical methods for epistemological growth provide lessons that can improve the polarized culture surrounding political disagreement.

The terms “groupthink” and “tribalism” are used frequently to describe the current state of American politics. These group-focused terms stem from the reality that most people are unwilling to listen to what “the other side” has to say. This tendency is reinforced by echo chambers caused by filter bubbles and algorithms on Internet platforms. On top of this unwillingness to hear what the other side has to say, the active practice of listening to dissenting opinions is not encouraged by online news resources and their algorithms. In fact, algorithms reinforce a person’s interests and biases in displaying news (Liu et al.). This is a surmounting issue because more and more people are getting their news from social media or online publications. According to a 2023 “News Platform Fact Sheet” from the Pew Research Center, “a large majority of U.S. adults (86%) say they often or sometimes get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet, including 56% who say they do so often” (Liedke). Mill’s argument seems to make sense in a world where everyone seeks to know the truth. This does not always seem to be the case, however. For example, the goal of disinformation is not aimed at the truth but, instead, manipulation, deception, and other forms of trickery. Disinformation is the opposite of the truth-

preserving efforts Mill encouraged. In this current era in which disinformation abounds on social media, where most people get news, is it possible that dissenting voices proclaiming falsities to be true are helpful in getting to the truth? And which is better: Censoring disinformation, and effectively cutting out dissenting views? Or, leaving all forms of disinformation abound on social media, and allowing people to make decisions based on information that is not true? Can disinformation even count as dissent, or is it another kind of speech entirely? I explore these questions that problematize both John Stuart Mill's and Sextus Empiricus' arguments in the following chapter on the Internet and its problems.

## The Internet Problem

*“The crisis we face about ‘truth’ and reliable facts is predicated less on the ability to get people to believe the \*wrong\* thing as it is on the ability to get people to \*doubt\* the right thing.”*

*– Jamais Cascio*

The emergence of the Internet as a primary source for news and information complicates both John Stuart Mill’s and Sextus Empiricus’ arguments for embracing dissent and open-minded inquiry. For their own reasons, Mill and Sextus both advocate that the best way to gain knowledge on a topic is through hearing as many sides of that issue as possible. At the same time, this knowledge-acquisition process requires critical thinking to discern between true and false claims. Getting news and information from the Internet and social media prevents people from easily hearing arguments on all sides of an issue – or from getting any useful information in the first place. Filter bubbles of information occur without any fault of the user. Algorithms create filter bubbles, where an individual’s views are reinforced with similar perspectives, which results in an echo chamber of information that aligns with that person’s interests and beliefs, effectively filtering out dissenting opinions (Liu et al.). On top of this, instances of disinformation, false claims presented as truth and intended to mislead, abound on the Internet. For these reasons, an individual must intentionally seek out information from news sources that are approaching the same issue from a different perspective; this process is not done *for* the user. At the same time, this individual must exercise their critical thinking skills. Without doing so, a person can easily become stuck in their preferred perspective on an issue or mistake disinformation for truth. In contrast, it is important to note that some people are not interested in this truth-seeking process; they are content in their echo chambers of information. For these people, algorithms on the Internet provide them with exactly what they want: their preferred

perspectives and opinions. This prevents them from having a more comprehensive understanding of the story; namely, they miss out on what the other parts of the issue are.

While algorithms can be helpful for online shopping and movie recommendations, when it comes to searching for information on a topic, algorithms disadvantage users from gaining a comprehensive understanding of a topic. So, how would Sextus and Mill respond to the reality that dissenting opinions are not often heard through social media, so some people only hear news from their “side”? Additionally, with the current state of the Internet and news media, how would Sextus and Mill respond to arguments in support of censoring social media accounts for disinformation or misleading claims? And further, would they both still advocate for hearing all sides of a topic when disinformation and conspiracy theories abound on the Internet, and are taken to be true by some people? I will lay out some arguments from John Stuart Mill’s point of view on censoring information online, before moving on to Sextus Empiricus and the ancient skeptics.

Mill’s argument did not account for the influence that the Internet would have on speech and the public forum. For this reason, applying Mill’s theory to the modern day appears less effective, though not insufficient. Mill was concerned with any group or individual who spoke for the truth without considering as many sides of the issue as possible. He thought it necessary for an individual who claimed to have knowledge of a topic to have heard as many views as possible on that topic. The following is what Mill expected to occur before a person claimed that they had a true belief on a topic:

The beliefs which we have most warrant for have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded. If the challenge is not accepted, or is accepted and the attempt fails, we are far enough from certainty still; but we have done the best that the existing state of human reason admits of; we have neglected nothing that could give the truth a chance of reaching us: if the lists are kept open, we may hope that if there be a better truth, it will be found when the human mind is capable of receiving it; and in the meantime we may rely on having attained such approach to

truth as is possible in our own day. This is the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being, and this the sole way of attaining it. (Mill, 22-23)

So, a view that is open to correction and collaboration is what Mill was advocating for. With the unending amount of information available on the Internet, it seems that this process Mill calls for should be simple. It should be easy to hear all the different sides of an issue and their arguments and counterarguments, given the amount of information available on the Internet. However, this is not the case. It is quite easy to hold a view and not give it a platform to be corrected, strengthened, or anything in between. The path of least resistance for an individual with a strong opinion is to not inquire into any other viewpoints or arguments on a topic. But, for Mill, an individual should never ignore or silence any view on an issue if they want to claim that they have knowledge of that issue. Because the importance lies in the possibility that the dissenting voices are true or hold some semblance of the truth. Mill states in *On Liberty*: “All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility” (Mill, 19). And no one is infallible. From any discussion, a person can learn something. In other words, no one knows everything, and everyone can learn something. It is a grave danger then, according to Mill, for any voice to be silenced, no matter how ridiculous or false; because that voice could somehow contribute to the truth of something. It seems that Mill’s answer to this question of censorship would be that, regardless of how absurd or horrible the false information might be, it must remain in the public sphere of information, because it will contribute to the complete understanding of that issue.

Mill’s marketplace of ideas argument is sensitive to different kinds of speech opposing one’s own. There are various reasons why it might be helpful for a person to listen to someone with a dissenting view. First, that person could be providing information that you simply did not know. By this, Mill emphasizes that no one has absolute certainty or knowledge. He explains: “To refuse a hearing to an opinion, because they are sure that it is false, is to assume that their certainty is the same thing as absolute certainty” (Mill, 19). So, this voice of opposition provides

you with more knowledge. Another reason is that a person's opinion could persuade you to rethink your own opinion and reasoning behind it. In this way, that person helps you either abandon your argument and acquire a better one, or they help you strengthen your reasoning for your argument. Finally, it might be helpful to listen to a voice of opposition for the simple reason that it allows you to know what your opponent is saying, and develop a response to their counterargument, which strengthens your argument. But what benefit does disinformation have? It is not truth-seeking, even though the Internet is a place where people trust that the information they are gathering is true. It also seems to be focused on manipulation. The harms of disinformation, however, do not seem to outweigh the costs of censorship. Because, who decides what is censored? What if they censor the wrong information? What if censoring stifles free speech and expression? It seems that these potential problems would cause more harm than the disinformation itself in the marketplace of ideas.

If a person lacks critical thinking skills and is exposed to disinformation online, whose fault is it that this person is now making decisions based on false information? Is it the media's fault, or the individuals? Or is it the fault of whoever posted the disinformation? If we are supposed to be open to all sides, as Sextus and Mill encourage us to be, then that would mean that we would also need to be open to disinformation. But is disinformation speech, or could it be considered something else? It seems that disinformation could be considered different from a dissenting opinion, because disinformation has no interest in getting to the truth at all. Its interests typically lie in manipulation or deception. And, for Mill, getting to the truth of a matter is the entire reason why this open-minded inquiry and embrace of dissent is necessary. It is important now to note Mill's Harm Principle. In the first chapter of *On Liberty*, he states: "That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others" (Mill, 13). Mill claimed that an



individual's actions are free up until the point in which those actions harm another person. At that point, an individual's actions can be controlled. So, using the Harm Principle to examine free speech and dissent, a person's speech is free from constraint up until the point in which that speech harms another person. The Harm Principle seems to be in tension with Mill's free speech argument that dissent of all forms should be unconstrained. Because some forms of speech *can* harm another person; for example, hate speech can cause emotional and/or psychological harm. Additionally, some speech can incite violence; for example, fighting words can instigate a riot. So, if disinformation or conspiracy theories lead to harm, it seems that Mill might agree that they would not be subjected to his free speech principles, and they might be open to some form of restriction. For example, if someone believed a conspiracy theory they read online which told them that the 2020 United States' presidential election votes were not accurately counted, and they joined a riot at the U.S. Capitol building to stop the vote-counting, would this violate Mill's Harm Principle? All this to say, Mill's potential answers to this question do not seem straightforward.

In his article "Minds wide open," Richard Bett discusses what Sextus might say about this problem: "What he gives us is a demonstration—an extreme one, perhaps—of what it is like to resist jumping to conclusions too easily. And that's something that I think we could use much more of today" (Bett). And Tampio builds on this framework, describing how the "sceptics think that part of being intellectually honest is admitting the limits and flaws of one's knowledge." (Tampio). From both interpretations, the assumption that there could be a person or organization who could declare what is true or false, to remove an opposing opinion, is viewed with displeasure. These interpretations made by Bett and Tampio highlight how the ancient skeptic was against any claim of irrefutable truth or knowledge. So, they would likely be against anyone claiming to know what is true or false online.

Sextus Empiricus and the ancient skeptics would not change their minds, either, on hearing all sides of an issue. Instead, it seems they would argue that more harm than good would occur if any organization began to censor information in the name of truth. Tampio offers an argument on this censorship problem in his essay on “Scepticism as a Way of Life.” He explains how “the sceptical tradition poses a recurrent challenge to anybody who claims to censor in the name of the reality-based community or objective truth. The sceptical tradition gives us reason to have doubts about anybody who speaks for the truth” (Tampio). Tampio explores the benefits ancient skepticism provides considering current arguments advocating censoring social media accounts and flagging disinformation online. The problem is that the information that is censored could possibly be true. In this way, the similarities between the ancient skeptics and John Stuart Mill are clear: if a person wants to claim knowledge of an issue, that person should listen to as many opinions on that issue as possible. And, consequently, no one should rid the public sphere of knowledge, regardless of that information’s perceived truth value. Put simply, it seems that both Sextus and Mill understand that, just as we cannot know the light without the darkness, we cannot know the truth without the nonsense.

At the same time, however, the practices of the ancient skeptic, as has been described, could prove to be beneficial to the very problem of disinformation and conspiracy theories online. If a person using the Internet has an open approach to inquiry like that of the ancient skeptics, then they would try to accumulate as many arguments on an issue as they could. This process would work as a safeguard against the problems caused by disinformation and conspiracy theories misunderstood to be truth. Of course, this information-gathering process only works for someone who is actively seeking the truth. There are some people who might be content in their filter bubble of information.

I am not entirely satisfied by the possible arguments from John Stuart Mill or the ancient skeptics. Censoring any kind of speech is a slippery slope, but what is the alternative? The people who participated in the January 6 Capitol Riot truly believed the misinformation and conspiracy theories which claimed that the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election votes were incorrectly counted. They believed this false information enough to disrupt the joint session of Congress in counting the Electoral College votes, breach the Capitol building, and attack police officers. In other words, these people acted violently due to their misinformed beliefs. Viewed through the lens of Mill's Harm Principle, could this resulting violence justify censorship of conspiracy and disinformation online? And if so, who would decide what information could be censored and what could not? And what would happen if certain groups or organizations could choose what information could be censored? The possible ethical violations and indirect burdens on public discourse and information access seem to outweigh the negative effects of disinformation. There must be another way to fix the dangerous effects false information on the Internet has on users. One possible solution could lie in media literacy education.

Mass media has allowed for an enormous amount of knowledge to be at our fingertips. Consequently, this wide-reaching access requires an ability to understand what is true, and what might be false information. It requires users to understand that not everything they watch or read on the Internet is true, unbiased, or the full story. The ability to critically analyze, interpret, and understand news media is called media literacy, and it is gaining traction as an important skill for educational institutions to provide students with. From K-12 to universities, media literacy is becoming increasingly important in the face of the Internet and its implications on knowledge. There are organizations and individuals already acting on bringing media literacy to more than just educational institutions, however.

The Internet and its inevitable disinformation are here to stay, so creative solutions to these problems are necessary. The following chapter provides numerous solutions that are already in action. In the following chapter, I discuss various applications of the open-minded practices from the ancient skeptics and John Stuart Mill outlined in this paper. I believe these individuals and organizations contribute to what media literacy is trying to accomplish: a more well-informed and open-minded public sphere for discussion and disagreement.

## Seeing Past the Political Enemy

### Practical Applications of Open-Minded Inquiry

*“The way to overcome something is not to avoid it but to move into it”*

*– Arnie Kozak*

Opening oneself up to the possibility of learning from a perceived “opponent” or “enemy” in a conversation is not an easy task. Disagreeing with someone who has a different outlook on the world than you can be a challenge, because you are viewing the world with different values in mind. As a result, your goals, and the methods to achieve them can stand in the way of connecting with that person over the values and goals you do share – common ground. However, what if engaging with people and ideas that are different from you is a practice that can improve your knowledge and strengthen your arguments? The practices of the ancient skeptics, who embraced the work of investigation and maintained some detachment from dogmatizing, suggest such a possibility. They provide some help for people who wish to strengthen their information-gathering skills today. John Stuart Mill encourages a similar method of hearing all sides through the practice of listening to dissenting voices, no matter how ridiculous those voices may be. The implementation of both philosophies provides some suggestions for how to deal with the polarized political climate in which we find ourselves today. Practicing the suggestions made by both philosophies can lead to more discovery and productivity in conversations. The practices for open-minded inquiry laid out in this thesis are admittedly uncomfortable and challenging. Additionally, I realize that the practices are made easier when an organization or group requires the behavior from anyone who wishes to be a part

of that group. For these reasons, this chapter serves as a testimony to individuals, groups, and organizations that are encouraging others to embrace open-minded inquiry and engage in civil discussions that value all sides of an issue. From the Supreme Court of the United States to an Environmental Science course at Penn State, open-minded inquiry is emerging as a strategic tool for engaging with an increasingly complex world. While these people and organizations might not know that their methods have roots in the philosophies of ancient skepticism and John Stuart Mill, I highlight in this chapter how they exemplify the strategies and tools that both philosophies provide.

A course at Penn State, Environmental Science, most well known by its course number “BiSci 3,” encourages students to embrace a method of open-minded inquiry throughout the entire semester. In BiSci 3, this method of openness is taught in order to aid students in thinking freely and creatively, which is the kind of thinking needed to generate solutions for the complexities of the climate crisis. Frequently throughout the semester, students are pushed to “admit ignorance and be open to discovery.” To do this, students are first taught about, and then challenged to escape, dualistic thinking patterns. For example, thinking that something is *either* bad or good; up or down; a success or a failure; teacher or student. In class, this pattern of dualistic thinking is referred to as “either/or” thinking. It is also commonly known as “black-and-white thinking.” Everything must be either one thing or the other; there is no gray area in this style of thinking. Either/or thinking is also dogmatic; it posits that there is only one way to view or understand something. But this kind of thinking is not applicable to our world. Because, our world is a gray, messy, ambiguous, complicated world! There are so many ways to understand something. This style of thinking is also dangerous because it leaves no room for ambiguity. Someone must be a teacher or student; not both. However, there are many interpretations of what a “teacher” is and what a “student” is. And, furthermore, a person can be a teacher and a student

at the same time. The problem with either/or thinking is highlighted when examined through the debate for the rights of people who are non-binary or gender-nonconforming. Some people are stuck in a dogmatic, either/or thinking pattern which limits their thinking to the belief that a person is either a woman or a man. They view gender in this strict binary way, and they cannot see out of this prescribed belief. So, they deny the existence and rights of people who do not see themselves in this way. This denial causes extensive harm to people who are non-binary or gender non-conforming and who do not view gender as binary. The effects of either/or thinking can inflict emotional or mental damage on other people.

Either/or thinking inhibits the openness and comprehensiveness that Sextus and Mill call for when searching for the truth. When a person believes there is only this limited, absolute understanding of an issue, employing creativity and problem-solving becomes much more difficult. And, without actively reflecting on and relearning how you think, a dogmatic and dualistic thinking pattern becomes second nature and a harder habit to break. BiSc 3 aims to help Penn State students break this habit and be open to discovery. In doing so, students are equipped with the tools to approach conversations and problems with an open mind. They are also equipped with the knowledge that there are many ways to approach a topic and many different perspectives that can contribute to that topic. These tools provide students with the creativity necessary to solve the complex issues of our world.

Another Penn State organization, World in Conversation, equips students with tools to navigate the complexity of our world by bringing to life the public sphere of debate and conversation that Mill envisioned for free speech. World in Conversation is the “Center for Public Diplomacy” in the College of the Liberal Arts at Penn State. They describe their vision:

There is so much work to be done to enable people who disagree fiercely to build the world together. That is why World in Conversation is training an “army” of conflict

facilitators to use dialogue as a tool to enable citizens on opposite sides of any border to build solutions together. (“World in Conversation”)  
To achieve this vision, World in Conversation trains dialogue facilitators who learn communication and leadership strategies to use during discussions. Facilitators are encouraged to embrace conflict as a means to discovery. Even further, dialogue facilitators are trained to make sure every voice is heard. Dialogue facilitators, in the World in Conversation facilitator training book *Transforming Conflict and Collaboration*, are encouraged to “take all sides” temporarily (Mulvey, 339). By doing this, the facilitator temporarily aligns with all sides of the discussion to help them work towards a consensus. In this way, facilitators embody the ancient skeptic’s practice of hearing all sides of an argument. And then they use this skill to help other people hear the other sides of the issue and work together to reach an understanding.

World in Conversation is important because of the growing tensions of political polarization and tribalism that the United States has been experiencing. Instead of encouraging people’s combative natures and avoiding the problem of polarization, World in Conversation’s dialogue facilitators encourage discussion and collaboration among people with varying perspectives. They bring people together regardless of political views, religious beliefs, or gender identities. All that matters is that participants are ready to engage in an open dialogue with others. World in Conversation began by fostering important discussions on a range of issues among college students. Now, they are working to expand these discussions to people from around the world. At a national level, and from a political standpoint, getting people to come together and talk about nuanced, polarizing issues might, at first, seem impossible (or inevitably catastrophic). However, that is precisely what the “America in One Room: Democratic Reform” deliberations accomplished – and the results are inspiring.

Created by Stanford University’s Deliberative Democracy Lab and led by Professors James Fishkin and Larry Diamond, the “America in One Room” 2019 experiment brought



together 523 registered American voters, carefully selected through a stratified random sample to represent “the political, cultural, and demographic diversity of the American electorate” (“America in One Room”). This group of American voters spent a weekend at a resort in Dallas, Texas participating in deliberations on key issues facing the nation. To gauge how the deliberations affected the participants, who are referred to as citizen-delegates by the project’s researchers, the citizen-delegates were polled on the issues before and after the deliberations. Additionally, they were given briefs on the issues, written by policy experts from across the ideological and political spectrum (“America in One Room”). An emphasis was placed on respect and openness during the deliberations. The results of the experiment illuminate the impact civil discussions can have on individuals’ views when those discussions ensure all participants are well-informed and all perspectives are given the space to be heard with respect. Further, the results show what could happen if more people followed the advice of the ancient skeptics and John Stuart Mill by listening to arguments on all sides of an issue with an open mind and approaching those arguments with a willingness to have their opinions changed or challenged. The researchers found that:

The most polarizing policy proposals, whether from the left or the right, generally lost support, and a number of more centrist proposals moved to the foreground. Crucially, proposals that were further on the right typically lost support from Republicans and proposals that were further on the left typically lost support from Democrats. (“America in One Room”)

Now, this thesis is not an argument in support of only moderate political opinions. However, these results show how extreme support of a policy, for the sole reason that that policy is aligned with an individual’s political party, might not be that individual’s true preference. In fact, that policy might not actually align with that individual’s personal values and interests; but they are supporting it because it is what their political party supports. The research findings from this experiment display what a more well-informed, open, and respectful socio-political environment

could look like for the United States – a depolarized environment. In Helena’s report on the experiment, they note how “at the heart of deliberative polling is the belief that, with enough open and honest communication, it is possible for even the most ideologically disparate people to engage with each other respectfully and to find common ground” (“America in One Room”). In this way, America in One Room, and deliberative democracy in general, exemplify what Cass Sunstein envisioned when he described a “culture of free speech” in *Why Societies Need Dissent*. As Sunstein argues, it is only a culture that prioritizes comprehensive and open discussions that can claim it values free speech. Deliberative democracy experiments, such as America in One Room, are a step in the right direction for counteracting political polarization through civil discussions.

In an international news effort to help people better understand all sides of an issue, Ground News works to ensure that all readers can think freely. Their vision is a “positive coexistence where cooperative, civil debate is the norm, media is accountable, and critical thought is the baseline of our news, media, and information consumption” (*Ground News*). As a news media company, Ground News aims to make it “easy to compare news sources, read between the lines of media bias and break free from algorithms.” They do this by providing “viewpoint diversity.” When publishing a news headline, they provide three different scores to any article: Bias, Factuality, and Ownership. The Bias score shows an article’s political leaning, from Left to Right. The Factuality score examines the credibility of the sources used and how fast corrections are made in the article. The Ownership score identifies who owns the news outlet and publishing company of the article, allowing readers to see the commitments of that publisher. These scores supply readers with a more critical lens in which to consume their news, which is essential to the process of gaining a comprehensive and open understanding of an issue. Also, Ground News gives readers all the varying headlines on the same story among publishers.

This tactic shows readers how the same story can be manipulated or sensationalized by different publishers, resulting in readers having a warped perception of the story. Ground News also provides the opportunity for educators and schools to utilize their resources to implement media literacy in their curriculums.

With all these provisions, Ground News provides a platform both Sextus and Mill would appreciate. The collection of differing perspectives paired with the abundance of reports gives readers the opportunity to hear as many sides as possible before forming their own opinion on the subject. Ground News states in an Instagram post on viewpoint diversity:

In today's shattered information ecosystem, we cannot hope to bridge political divides or convince others to see our perspective if we do not try to immerse ourselves in and understand the media ecosystems that inform people who disagree with us. (Ground News)

Gaining an understanding of the “information ecosystems” of people who we disagree with ensures that dissenting views are heard, and this is what Ground News is providing for readers. In this way, Ground News counteracts the filter bubbles and echo chambers of information caused by algorithms. Through strategic and creative solutions like Ground News, political polarization can be subdued at an institutional and international level.

In the Supreme Court of the United States, a Justice utilized a similar method of understanding the views of those who disagreed with him. Originalism is a judicial philosophy in which judges examine the Constitution through the narrow lens of the time that it was written. This philosophy, then, leaves judges with little room for interpretation or forward-thinking. This was the preferred interpretation style for late United States Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. However, Justice Scalia had a way to counteract, and simultaneously strengthen, his judicial reasoning. He was known for being the only Justice on the Court with a “counter-clerk.” A counter-clerk is a clerk whose judicial philosophy opposes the judge they are clerking for. So,

an ideological conservative whose legal philosophy was strongly originalist, Justice Scalia's jurisprudence could have been easily predictable. However, his counter-clerk ensured this was not always the case. In Justice Scalia's chambers, his counter-clerk was always in opposition to him: an ideological liberal. He was the only Justice to do this, and no one forced him to do so. He purposefully selected one clerk in opposition to him. When asked in an interview how he chose his counter-clerk, Justice Scalia said the following:

... I've said often in the past that other things being equal, which they usually are not, I like to have one of the four clerks whose predispositions are quite the opposite of mine—who are social liberals rather than social conservatives. That kind of clerk will always be looking for the chinks in my armor, for the mistakes I've made in my opinion. That's what clerks are for—to make sure I don't make mistakes. (Senior)

This was a strategic move for Justice Scalia. Whereas conservative, textualist clerks would typically agree with his reasoning, liberal, constructivist clerks would be able to more easily find the errors in his reasoning. But, more than this, Justice Scalia opened himself up to oppositional arguments. In fact, he was known for his seemingly odd friendship with former Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, his ideological opposite. In these ways, Scalia made sure that he always had a voice of dissent that checked his reasoning and ideas. He opened himself up to opposing arguments and would allow himself to be swayed by the counter-clerk's arguments if they were strong.

Scalia also believed his originalist and textualist interpretation style of the Constitution should sometimes lead him to a decision he did not agree with. For example, in the landmark Supreme Court case *Texas v. Johnson* (1989), Scalia sided with the liberal majority in its decision that burning the American flag is symbolic speech protected by the First Amendment's Free Speech Clause. This decision came at a cost to his personal feelings on the matter: Scalia thought that every person who burned the American flag should go to jail (Samuel, 3). In an

article reflecting on his experience as a counter-clerk for Justice Scalia in 2012, Ian Samuel explains what was expected of him as the counter-clerk: “to stop your boss from doing something that would be a mistake by his own lights. You are required to speak up; your duty is to disagree, and to state that disagreement using the Justice's methodology” (Samuel, 3). Scalia understood how his dogmatic thinking could limit him from applying his own methodology. His implementation of a counter-clerk opened him up to seeing how his commitments could be restricting him from a sound decision. In these ways Justice Antonin Scalia embraced dissenting views and opened himself up to other sides of an issue.

It is easy to look at the state of polarization in the United States today and think that it is too far gone to improve. However, there are people and organizations actively working on and implementing solutions to this problem. Whether it is at the University or international level, strategies employing open-minded techniques are at work. As awareness of them is increased, hopefully they will become more common. While it is important to display the ways that open-minded inquiry is already being applied in the world, it is also important to provide general guidelines that people can implement immediately in their lives. If you, the reader, feel inclined to begin practicing these open-minded strategies, the following chapter provides 10 steps to doing so.

## **10 Steps to Keeping an Open Mind**

1. Embrace uncertainty.
2. View discussions as pathways to discovery – not competitions.
3. Accept that you might be wrong.
4. Practice being Mill’s “bystander” and allow yourself to be swayed by all sides of an issue.
5. Learn about topics from a variety of ideologically different news outlets.
6. Improve your media literacy skills.
7. Implement some of the Skeptic Formulae into your daily language.
8. Learn, unlearn, and relearn; avoid trapping yourself in one opinion.
9. Continuously ask yourself: Have I talked to someone who I disagree with about this topic? If the answer is no, then talk to them about that topic.
10. Remind yourself: You don’t know everything, and you can always learn something.

## Conclusion

*“Information is only as reliable as the people who are receiving it. If readers do not change or improve their ability to seek out and identify reliable information sources, the information environment will not improve.”*

*– Julia Koller*

There is not one, clear-cut solution to the political extremism and polarization that the United States is facing today. The remedy to this polarization problem will come out of various creative solutions; solutions that encourage openness where there is usually rigidity, and conversation where there is usually disconnect. This thesis serves as my contribution to the remedying of America’s political polarization. Through a shared commitment to a more open-minded approach in searching for knowledge on any given issue, I believe the state of political and civil discourse in the United States could be much improved. Presented in this paper, the practices and ways of life provided by Sextus Empiricus, the ancient skeptics, and John Stuart Mill highlight the benefits of open-minded inquiry and how to implement this epistemic approach in the age of the Internet.

From Sextus Empiricus and the ancient skeptics, a lesson in comprehensive knowledge acquisition is gained. Instead of sticking with one strong opinion or belief, opening oneself to other arguments and opinions on that issue can bring about a peaceful approach in gathering information and having discussions about that issue. From John Stuart Mill, an argument for hearing dissenting views is provided, supporting the ancient skeptics’ comprehensive approach. Dissenting views, Mill explains, are essential to a well-functioning democracy and, also, a well-functioning civil society. So, according to the work of Sextus Empiricus and John Stuart Mill, hearing all sides of an issue is a worthwhile epistemic pursuit. The prevalence of disinformation

on the Internet problematizes these arguments from the ancient skeptics and Mill, because it seems that disinformation should not be included in this open-minded inquiry approach. Critical thinking is necessary to discern between true and false information. I recognize this open-minded approach is not easy and could be made easier if supported by institutional measures. So, media literacy in educational systems seems to present itself as a strong solution.

Prioritizing effective media literacy and critical thinking courses in the education system is an important place to start. California's legislature is taking steps to do this with its required media literacy classes for K-12 students: "The bill is designed to help students develop skills in identifying false information online amid a worrying rise in distrust in the media" (Najib). As discussed in the practical applications chapter, the organization Ground News is already supporting educational institutions in this effort to provide students with media literacy and critical thinking skills. As an organization, they offer "subscriptions via LibraryUp, marking a partnership to promote media literacy on campuses and communities worldwide. ... Our collaboration empowers readers on and off campus to critically analyze news, identify biases, and explore multiple perspectives on complex issues" (*Ground News*). In the face of seemingly unstoppable instances of disinformation on social media, educational institutions must adapt their curriculums and prepare students for a world where the public forum of speech and debate exists mostly online.

The riots at the Capitol on January 6, 2021 showed us what our future will look like if we continue to refuse to listen to each other, remaining complacent within our echo chambers and filter bubbles of information. We must do better in seeing our world and its issues from different perspectives – through other eyes.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

PH = *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* by Sextus Empiricus in:

Etheridge, Sanford, translator. *Sextus Empiricus: Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism, Man, & God*. Hackett Publishing Company, 1985.

“America in One Room.” *Helena*, <https://helena.org/projects/america-in-one-room>.

Bett, Richard. “Minds wide open.” Princeton University Press, 14 Apr. 2021, <https://press.princeton.edu/ideas/minds-wide-open>. Accessed 6 Feb. 2023.

Broockman, David, and Joshua Kalla. “Consuming Cross-cutting Media Causes Learning and Moderates Attitudes: A Field Experiment with Fox News Viewers.” OSF Preprints, 1 Apr. 2022. Web.

Fishkin, James and Diamond, Larry. “Can deliberation cure our divisions about democracy?” *Boston Globe*, 21 Aug. 2023, <https://deliberation.stanford.edu/sites/g/files/sbiybj21211/files/media/file/fishkin-diamond-op-ed.pdf>. Accessed 25 Feb. 2024.

*Ground News*. Ground News, <https://ground.news/>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2024.

Ground News [@groundnews]. “What are News Blindspots, and why are they important?” *Instagram*, 9 Nov. 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Czcka3OMXrC/?igsh=NGNxZGh5ZW85eXh2>.

Liedke, Jacob and Luxuan Wang. “News Platform Fact Sheet.” *Pew Research Center*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/news-platform-fact-sheet/>. Accessed 10 Jan. 2024.

Liu, Ping et al. “The Interaction between Political Typology and Filter Bubbles in News Recommendation Algorithms.” *Proceedings of the Web Conference 2021* (2021): n. Pag.

Luisa [@oisferposterjourn]. “I hope you find the courage to say.” *Instagram*, 30 Jul. 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CvVJDgyyv4n/?igsh=NTk4cGppcHIxZzJ0>.

Machete, Paul, and Marita Turpin. “The Use of Critical Thinking to Identify Fake News: A Systematic Literature Review.” *Responsible Design, Implementation and Use of Information and Communication Technology: 19th IFIP WG 6.11 Conference on e-Business, e-Services, and e-Society, I3E 2020, Skukuza, South Africa, April 6–8, 2020, Proceedings, Part II* vol. 12067 235–246. 10 Mar. 2020, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-45002-1\_20.

Mulvey, Laurie L., et al. *Transforming Conflict and Collaboration*. World in Conversation, 2019.

- Najib, Shafiq. "California's new law requires K-12 students to learn media literacy." *Good Morning America*, 21 Nov. 2023,  
[https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/living/story/californias-new-law-requires-12-students-learn-media-105077960?utm\\_source=ground.news&utm\\_medium=referral](https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/living/story/californias-new-law-requires-12-students-learn-media-105077960?utm_source=ground.news&utm_medium=referral).  
Accessed 29 Dec. 2023.
- Pew Research Center. "The Future of Truth and Misinformation Online." 19 Oct. 2017,  
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/10/19/the-future-of-truth-and-misinformation-online>. Accessed 30 Mar. 2024.
- Proust, Marcel. *In Search of Lost Time*. Translated by C.J. Moncrieff, D.J. Enright., and Terence Kilmartin, Modern Library, 2003.
- Samuel, Ian. "The Counter-Clerks of Justice Scalia." Articles by Maurer Faculty (2016). 2689.  
<https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/facpub/2689>.
- Senior, Jennifer. "In Conversation: Antonin Scalia." *New York Magazine*, 4 Oct. 2013,  
<https://nymag.com/news/features/antonin-scalia-2013-10/>. Accessed 24 Jan. 2024.
- Sunstein, Cass R. *Why Societies Need Dissent*. Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Tampio, Nicholas. "Scepticism as a Way of Life." *Aeon*, 25 Mar. 2022,  
<https://aeon.co/essays/scepticism-is-a-way-of-life-that-allows-democracy-to-flourish>.  
Accessed 30 Aug. 2023.
- "World in Conversation." *Penn State College of the Liberal Arts*,  
<https://worldinconversation.psu.edu/>.

## ACADEMIC VITA

*Madison Lee Phillips*

### EDUCATION

**Schreyer Honors College, at The Pennsylvania State University**  
*College of the Liberal Arts*

**University Park, PA**  
*Graduation: May 2024*

Bachelor of Arts in Political Science

Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy, with honors (focus in justice, law, & values)

*Study abroad experience: **Institute for American Universities** in Aix-en-Provence, France*

### SELECTED HONORS & AWARDS

- Phi Beta Kappa Society member
- 2024 Penn State Philosophy Department Student Marshal
- Recipient of 2023-24 Schreyer Honors College Rita Ebner Caste Scholarship
- Recipient of 2023-34 College of the Liberal Arts Hitchner & Showalter Scholarship
- Recipient of 2023-24 College of the Liberal Arts Agnes Kennedy Tiley Scholarship
- Recipient of Summer 2023 Student Engagement Network Grant to study abroad
- Recipient of 2022-23 Penn State Department of Philosophy's Ray H. Dotterer Award
- Recipient of 2022-23 Penn State Department of Political Science's Kim Anderson Memorial Scholarship

### TEACHING & WORK EXPERIENCE

**Biological Sciences 3 (BiSc3) Teaching Community**

**University Park, PA**

*Environmental Science Teaching Assistant*

*August 2022 - May 2023*

*Environmental Science Learning Coordinator*

*August 2023 - present*

- Facilitate discussions on course content during weekly trainings for Teaching Assistants
- Provide feedback on training Teaching Assistants' weekly pedagogical reflections
- Construct and plan for weekly training meetings with fellow Learning Coordinators
- Create and lead extra credit movie opportunities for BiSc 3 Spring 2024 students
- Guided training group through a team-building weekend retreat at Shaver's Creek Environmental Center

**Philosophy of Law Undergraduate Research**

**University Park, PA**

*Student Mentor and Undergraduate Researcher*

*January 2023 - May 2023*

- Guided students in exam review sessions for PHIL 105 (Philosophy of Law)
- Conducted independent research on the Supreme Court and its history of judicial review for weekly research team meetings, under the supervision of Dr. Eduardo Mendieta
- Completed individual paper on the genealogy of judicial review in the Supreme Court

**Harvest Moon Coffee & Chocolates**

**Tarentum, PA**

*Barista*

*May 2021 - August 2023*

- Efficiently take orders, prepare, and serve drinks and food to customers
- Settle conflicts with customers in a manner that ensures their satisfaction

**Business Calculus I Learning Assistant Program**

**Virtual**

*Learning Assistant*

*January 2021 - April 2021*

- Successfully completed the Learning Assistant training pedagogy courses
- Scheduled & led weekly review sessions of course materials for MATH 110 students
- Consulted with Prof. Gina Monks weekly to give input on improving strategies for student engagement