Mill argues in his piece “On Liberty” that freedom of speech, meaning no form of restriction both legally and socially, will lead to the promotion of truth, which will then in turn promote overall well-being. Mill, being a prominent utilitarian, emphasized that the general practice of non-interference would have the best “*actual consequences.*” (Professor Estlund, Lecture 03-24, 2021) He stated that silencing one person’s opinion would justify that one person in silencing the rest of “mankind.” (Pg. 356, Mill) Furthermore, Mill claimed that no one would be able to tell if the silenced opinion had entailed the whole if not a portion of the truth (Pg. 361, Mill) and that by silencing opinion, if the opinion is correct, society is deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth,” (Pg. 356, Mill) and even if the opinion is flawed, “they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.” (Pg. 356, Mill) He established that refusing to listen by assuming something is false was “to assume that their certainty is the same thing as *absolute certainty.*” (Pg. 356) On top of this, Mill argues that opinions are rarely full of whole truths, meaning that open debate between opinions must occur for the whole truth to be revealed. Most importantly, Mill expressed that the only way one can assume that their current opinion is the truth at that moment is if, and only if, everyone is given “[c]omplete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion.” (Pg. 357) Mill believes that all opinions must be “vigorously and earnestly contested,” (Pg. 361) for the resulting outcome opinion to be allowed to be assumed as a truth.

In response to Mill’s argument, Schauer focuses on Mill’s point that social and legal non-interference in speech leads to the promotion of truth, arguing that non-interference of speech does not guarantee the promotion of truth. Schauer indicates that Mill had conceded that people were not good at discerning what the truth was, which led Schauer to ask that if that is true, how it could be argued that “the truth would tend to win out under freedom of expression.” (Estlund, 03-24) In fact, in Schauer’s piece “The Progress Towards Knowledge,” Schauer argues that there is no “causal link between free speech and increased knowledge” so “the argument for truth must fail.” (Pg. 19) He claims that arguing that the process of open discussion will promote truth “begs the question,” (Pg. 20) as the question of “why is the process of open discussion preferable to any other process, such as random selection or authoritarian fiat?” (Pg. 20) arises. Before proceeding further, for clarity, as Mill took for granted that speech must be legally protected, both Schauer and Mill can be assumed to be primarily concerned with social ostracization as the method of interfering with speech, Mill arguing that social ostracization of speech should be restricted while Schauer is of contradiction. Nevertheless, despite Schauer’s rebuttal, Mill’s argument continues to stand within certain limits.

A modern example that will in hindsight support Schauer’s argument is the sharing of opinions lacking logical reasoning. Take for example a public speaker openly sharing their opinion that Earth is flat in a public scientific debate, but all participants of the debate end up agreeing that the Earth is flat. This example seems to show a case where there is no evident link between free speech and an increase in the chance of learning the whole truth, as the resulting opinion of the debate, that Earth is flat, is an opinion that has no logical reasoning backing up the opinion, thereby making it far from being an opinion that is a truth. Intuitively, this shows that the outcome of this public scientific debate indeed does not promote the truth. One could further argue that it promotes the opposite of the truth, or false information, which will not promote well-being over time as it will confuse the beliefs of society and delay scientific progress, invalidating Mill’s argument for non-interference of any sort in speech.

However, in defense of Mill, one could ask the following rhetorical question: how can one be sure that one side is true if people do not consider the other extreme side of the argument and can effectively refute that extreme claim? It could be argued that the opinion that Earth is flat is in fact contributing to the discovery of truth as it offers people with contrary opinions to logically refute those claims, thereby strengthening their own opinion and getting close enough to the whole truth that one can safely assume that Earth is not flat. But this can only be assumed to be the whole truth if the opposing views, no matter how extreme the views may be, are allowed to be openly debated and discussed. This would have to mean that such debates would have to determine which opinion has the most logical reasoning behind it, which in turn may pose yet another question: who decides what is most logical? Do numbers necessarily mean it is entirely correct? But this seems to be a question that can be expanded in an existential manner whereby one could ask how we would certainly know if anything were real. Hence, this begging of the question is endless and does not lead to any useful conclusion, so it should be avoided. This seems to say that whichever opinion – which will only be enabled through open discussion and non-interference of the whole spectrum of opinions relating to the relevant topic – has more logical weight to it can be considered to be closer to the whole truth.

Yet, this gives rise to a critical issue, that being the loss of a scarce resource: time. For even if the defense holds and the opinion that Earth is flat in actuality helps society get closer to the truth of our Earth’s shape, the amount of delay in scientific progress that could result from such opposing opinions might justify the need to socially interfere with those types of speech. For example, if one avid believer in the opinion that Earth is flat could influence a large audience using grandiose and emotional speeches, the scientific community would have to spend significant time persuading these heavily influenced people into the contrary opinion with more logical reasoning: the opinion that Earth is not flat. This procedure of persuading all such people can result in a lot of lost progress as it requires substantial time, time which could be argued as a waste of time in making scientific progress. Thus, aligning with Mill’s Harm Principle, which briefly is the principle in “which the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others, (1978, 9)” (van Mill, David, “Freedom of Speech: 2.1 The Harm Principle and Free Speech,” <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/freedom-speech/#HarPriFreSpe>) the type of speech that has no logical reasoning and lags scientific progress should only be socially ostracized if and only if those opinions become too time-consuming, causing humanity to regress which could arguably be considered a harm to society in totality.