

The Nature and Value of Academic Freedom

Address to the Saint Mary's University Philosophy Society and the Saint Mary's University
Political Science Society, 3 April 2006

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- 1) Academic freedom is a variety of freedom of expression.
- 2) Not many people have strong commitments toward freedom of expression.
When it conflicts with things they hold dear, they are happy to abandon it.
It was depressing, though not unexpected, to see how little so many students and professors at Saint Mary's care for it.
- 3) Any two things we hold dear can come into conflict. In which direction we go indicates our stronger value. I want to give reasons for having a strong commitment to academic freedom and to freedom of expression generally.
- 4) Freedom of expression is the freedom to say what you want to whom you want when and where you want without fear of criminal or civil charges or political or economic repercussions for you. You lack freedom of expression if you are prevented from expressing something to whomever you want to or if you face jail or fines or discipline or banishment or unemployment or homelessness... for expressing something.
- 5) Being subject to a wide variety of informal sanctions for saying or doing certain things does not deprive one of freedom.
- 6) Expression: anything—words, pictures, a dance, an object...; jokes, stories, messages, demands....
- 7) One is not free if one is free merely to express oneself responsibly. One is not free if one is free to say what one wants so long as one is out of earshot.
- 8) Restrictions on when, where, how loud, how long... are necessary for order and the demands of daily life, but must be mild. Authorities must strive to accommodate those who wish to express something. Those of us committed to freedom of expression will tolerate some disruption to our projects for the sake of expression, though we are not happy to do so. Those of us committed to freedom of expression oppose restrictions on the content and on the target audience of expression.

9) Academic freedom: freedom from formal sanctions in research and teaching. One enjoys academic freedom when one can investigate what one wants how one wants and can teach what one wants how one wants. This includes advocacy in research and teaching.

10) Authorities are properly interested in the results of one's research and teaching. (To what extent has intellectual life benefitted from your researches? To what extent have your students become competent intellectuals?) Except to the extent that your methods of research and teaching are unethical, authorities are not to take an interest in your methods of research or teaching.

11) First defence of a strong commitment to freedom of expression and academic freedom: You like to express yourself. You sometimes want others to see or hear (or smell...) something, for whatever your own particular reasons are. Restrictions on expression prevent you from expressing yourself.

12) Those who don't themselves care to express themselves can appreciate that others within their communities do want to express themselves.

13) Second defence: Our lives are better for being able to search for and find pictures or stories or music or statements or debates that we find interesting or useful. That is, lack of restrictions on expression benefits those of us who would make up an audience.

14) Third defence: Inquiry and debate into how to live is richer and more productive when participants in inquiry and debate are free to participate how they will. Through inquiry and debate we come to understand things better—and a better understanding of things can have practical benefits in law and policy.

15) Fourth defence: Discussion and argument is an effective tool against false beliefs and vicious or ignoble projects or values. (Is it a more effective tool than suppression?)

16) Fifth defence: Laws against expression require intelligence, knowledge, sensitivity, and good will on the part of those who make and apply them if they are not to be dangerous to all of us. Never require of a law that it be safe only when applied by people of intelligence, knowledge, sensitivity, and good will. Be aware who the censors might be and what their goals might be.

17) Sixth defence: Rule of law requires consent of the governed, and the governed cannot consent to laws they cannot speak against in the manner of their choosing.

18) Seventh defence: To restrict what people can say is to treat them disrespectfully. To protect people from hearing things is to treat them disrespectfully.

19) Objection: But restrictions have good social consequences. —Is this true? Are the aspirations of individual Canadians in fact promoted by these laws? Or is it really just a matter of protecting people from upset and hurt feelings? (Sticks and stones....)

20) Tolerance is a virtue at least in that its exercise often requires sacrifice. It is upsetting to encounter expressions of racism, sexism, homophobia, and the like. Still, for at least seven reasons we ought to be tolerant, even when it hurts.