

The dark side of academic freedom, and why it's not all that dark

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Academic freedom has a dark side—it can easily contribute to making a bad situation worse. Academic freedom, that is, can enable irresponsible teachers, researchers, and critics to continue to teach, conduct research, or criticize irresponsibly.

Professors at a university possess academic freedom to the extent that they are able to teach, engage in research, speak in public, and criticize their institutions as they see fit, without risking official sanction. Academic freedom does not, of course, enable them to violate with impunity the contracts under which they hold their positions. Professors must, that is, teach the courses they have been assigned, be in their offices available to students a certain number of hours, and so on, or face formal discipline. Even here, though, the concerns and preferences of professors have made a difference, as their faculty unions have had a lot to say about the conditions under which they teach and conduct research.

Academic freedom is important for its contribution to the production and dissemination of new ideas and new ways of teaching. It contributes to this by shielding professors from pressures to voice only old ideas and to conform to old ways. More than that, though, academic freedom is crucial to fostering a way of life in which people hold themselves responsible to argument and evidence, and only to argument and evidence. It does this by minimizing the many pressures to which belief and practice are subject. Academic freedom at a university makes honesty, candour, and openness easier and more prevalent than they would be otherwise. It supports a community in its drive to be a community of intellectuals.

Now a community of intellectuals is not one in which everybody leaves everybody else alone. Far from it. It is, rather, a community marked by public controversy and critical discussion. Members of such a community will investigate, evaluate, and publicly discuss each others' research, teaching, opinions, and practices. And they will be open to consider whatever criticism of their own that they hear. Of course, people being people, even members of the community most committed to living by the norms of intellectual life and only by those norms will now and again apply social pressures—small insults, shunning—in order to change minds or control behaviour. But in their best moments they will regret having done so and resolve to try harder. Anyway, in such a community, people will be self assured enough not to let minor social pressures deflect them from their chosen paths.

That a university community refrains from enforcing through sanctions any conception of good teaching or research does not imply that members of that community hold that each conception is as good as all the others. It implies only that they hold the question which conception or conceptions are best to be too important to close bureaucratically. Even should a consensus of opinion freely emerge, they would judge codifying that consensus a betrayal of their community.

Now it's easy to see how academic freedom can make a bad situation worse. By protecting their livelihood and their place in the classroom and the lab, academic freedom removes the most effective ways in which to steer errant professors onto the right path. The professor whose research project is bunk or whose teaching methods are ineffective or repellent may continue to pursue that project or use those methods if she chooses to do so. The professor whose criticisms are one sided or unfair may continue to voice those criticisms. If this errant professor doesn't accept the clear evidence or the sound argument against her—or, worse, if she continues in her ways despite accepting that evidence or argument—, there's nothing left for the community to do.

That's the dark side, but it's really not all that dark. The first thing to note in appreciating how light this dark side is is just how rarely the sort of thing we fear actually occurs. Professors are almost inevitably responsive to just criticism. This is not surprising, as the thought of being a professor could appeal only to someone who cares to live by the norms of intellectual life. And her many years as a student have made these norms second nature to her.

The second thing to note is that alleged cases of errant professors are often actually instances of honest disagreement about standards or practices. The matter isn't how to get the errant professor to see reason; it's actually a matter of where reason says the error lies. But that's a matter that academic freedom rightly serves to keep open.

Nonetheless, sometimes, very rarely, a bad professor is protected in his obstreperousness by academic freedom.

We have to accept this fact. To try to deal with the occasional irresponsible member of our community by applying social or administrative pressure to get her to change her ways is repugnant to us as intellectuals. It's our pleasure in these cases simply to try to make the best of a bad situation.