

## 282. Say What You Please, Even If You Don't Back it with Reasons

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Professors, students, and all other members of an academic community should be free from sanction to say what they please. Freedom of expression should be guaranteed in official university documents, including, of course, collective agreements. Guarantees, though, are not worth much if the university's culture is hostile to freedom of expression. One duty members of a university community have, then, is to uphold freedom of expression on their campuses. Professors and others should do what they can to ensure that their campus is hospitable to the free expression of ideas and emotions.

Some say those within the academy should be free from sanction to say what we please—as long, that is, as we seek to back up what we say with evidence or reasons. We must be willing to engage in critical discussions of what we say. That the position we take is a reasoned position or that we welcome criticism of what we say is necessary to our enjoyment of freedom of expression on campus. If we are prone to make outlandish claims without offering evidence, or if we turn our backs on criticism, we might rightly be told by a university official to reform our ways or keep quiet. If we persist and draw the ire of a colleague, student, or other member of our community, we should face corrective discipline, if not punitive discipline.

That freedom of expression on campus is conditional on giving reasons or responding to criticism is not the majority view among expression's advocates, thankfully, but it does find some support among them. It is a common view, though, among those who dislike or fear freedom of expression on campus, including administrators and others with power. It is a claim frequently marshalled by those who seek to justify restrictions on campus expression or to extend them further. That is why it is important to be clear why this claim is false.

Now it is true that being ready and willing to explain oneself and to respond to criticism (sometimes by changing one's mind) is a virtue among academics. Many of us are drawn to universities precisely because we enjoy and appreciate debate and the clash of ideas. We want to believe only truths, of course, but we want also to understand why the truths *are* truths, and that requires that we comprehend the reasons things are as they are. A prophet who does not engage in critical discussion would impede our pursuit of understanding, even should he speak nothing but ennobling truths.

The spirit of critical discussion requires a critical mass of committed discussants but requiring that professors and others be open to discussion, or else, will damage the whole enterprise. That is because the threat of penalties will tend to dampen discussion. Engaging well in critical discussion is not easy. It is a skill that, for most of us, is acquired only over the long run. Discussions at universities are always potentially hurtful, for they raise matters important to our personal

identities and, thereby, put what we care about at risk. The only way to encourage a willingness to participate in the conflict of ideas is to remove worries that if one steps out of line, one will be sanctioned. These worries cannot be entirely removed. Worries about official sanction can be assuaged, though, simply by making sure that no officials have the power to apply sanctions.

We need to protect the ability to say something and then retreat from the conversation if we are to encourage robust participation in conversation. We should criticize retreating, certainly, although not in personal terms. We should criticize it as out of keeping with intellectual community. Yet it must remain an option.

Professors and students are both subject to evaluation—their work is, I mean. Students are evaluated more regularly than professors, but professors are thoroughly evaluated when seeking tenure or promotion, or election to an office, or when allegations of incompetence have been leveled against them. It's only at these times that judgements regarding their performance as campus discussants should have official weight. In some of their classes, students are graded on class participation. Failing to present arguments or evidence, ignoring criticism, absenting oneself from the discussion, and going on irrelevantly will bring a student's score down. Exactly the same faults will harm a professor's attempt to gain tenure. Class participation is just one factor determining a student's proper grade in a course. Occasional or frequent indifference or hostility to giving reasons or to criticism is also just one factor tenure committees should take into account in coming to their decision. But because engaging in discussion is part of university life, and because engaging in it well is explicitly expected of us all, it is both fair and necessary that the quality of one's contribution to discussion be assessed at those times when one's performance as a student or a professor is officially assessed.

I would insist, though, despite the centrality of critical discussion to university life, that withholding reasons or standing away from discussion is at times academically sound. I once had a professor who was very good at teaching by simply stating a claim, sometimes an outrageous one, and then leaving the students alone to discuss it. He occasionally did that sort of thing with colleagues (it infuriated some of them). Many years ago, a member of my department simply posted a series of cartoons on his office door, without explanation or comment. I thought it a bold gesture that should have stimulated thought. (Unfortunately, it got him into trouble. The cartoons were the *Jyllands-Posten* Mohammed cartoons and our administrators were the first in line to complain.)

Professors and students should—except when they have academic reason not to—speak only with reasons and be willing to hear and consider criticism. That is because speaking with reasons and engaging in critical discussion is our pleasure as members of an academic community. Nonetheless, no one should be forced to give reasons or listen to criticism, for requiring responsibility to the conversation will not promote critical discussion but can only harm it, because it might stifle participation.

Those who would restrict expression on campus like to distinguish between academic freedom and freedom of expression. While freedom of expression is available to all and doesn't come with responsibilities to speak usefully or to explain or justify what one says, academic freedom does. These responsibilities should be enforced, they add, or universities would be no better than

speakers' corners or talk radio. Rules are needed to keep order and to keep members of the community on track. The rule not to speak except with reasons and with a willingness to consider criticism is a good rule of academic life, they say, for it discourages blowhards and mountebanks and, thereby, works to prevent bad expression from driving out good.

The rule in question would tend to inhibit discussion, I've argued. Others say it would reduce the quantity of bad discussion. It might appear, then, that while there is something to be said against the rule, there is also something to be said for it. Thus, the matter whether to institute the rule is to be decided by weighing the two considerations.

Given the disdain for freedom of expression on campus these days and the increasing administrative oversight and control of discussion, I think that the weight of argument is against the rule. More importantly, though, I don't think we should in the first place be warm to the idea of keeping academic order through rules. That rules are useful or necessary to keep the conversation rich and productive is a mistake of the highest order.

We need rules when we don't share a purpose and threaten to get in each other's way. The rule requiring us to clear the snow from the sidewalk in front of our house is a good example. So is the rule against parking across the sidewalk. Rules such as these serve coordination problems among people who don't share a common end. I have to be made to care about your easy access to the sidewalk and enforcing a rule will do the trick. When we do share a common end, though, we will each act such as to attain that end as well as we can. Side constraints meant to direct us toward that end are at best useless, given that we are already sufficiently motivated. Worse, such rules are disruptive. As members of an intellectual community, our end is to engage critically with the things of the world so as to understand and appreciate them. Given that this is our end, we will, over time and by pursuing that end, fall into habits of giving reasons and listening to criticism, for we see that these habits serve our ends. Indeed, we see that failing to give reasons or to listen to criticism will prevent us from attaining our ends. The rule that requires us to give reasons is, then, like a rule requiring us to savor our food.

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