Two ways of thinking about academic freedom

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Academic freedom protects researchers so that they might discover the truth and tell it to the world. It protects teachers so that they might find and use effective ways of instructing their students. And it protects professors critical of goings on at their universities so that they might help their universities to remain sound institutions of higher learning.

The discovery of truth, the dissemination of knowledge, and the care of the university are the central elements in what appears currently to be the most widespread understanding of academic freedom. According to this understanding, because we value truth, knowledge, and the university's mission to promote both, we should value academic freedom.

For my part, though, I prefer a different understanding of the nature and value of academic freedom, one that begins from a particular conception of the nature and value of the university itself. Although, on this other understanding, academic freedom continues to protect truth, knowledge, and the care of the university, none of the three is the root value that academic freedom serves.

The understanding I favour conceives of the university as a community in which individuals enjoy, or aspire to enjoy, full intellectual autonomy. They enjoy, or aspire to enjoy, intellectual autonomy for themselves, but they are also committed to ensuring that the other members of the community can enjoy it along with them. The purpose of academic freedom, then, is to promote and maintain a community in which people enjoy full intellectual autonomy.

We enjoy intellectual autonomy when we believe what we believe and value what we value for our own considered reasons. We are less than fully autonomous intellectually when our reasons for believing and valuing are opaque to us or are merely the causes of our mental states. The reasons why we believe or value as we do are merely causes when they consist in the pressures of punishment or reward. Suppose, for instance, that we believe that species evolve by means of natural selection. If we believe that they do because we don't wish to appear ignorant or stupid, or because we crave acceptance by our peers, then we believe they do in indifference to whether in fact they do; we don't actually care to understand the origin of species; we care, rather, not to appear ignorant or stupid. To believe something in indifference to its truth is to lack intellectual autonomy.

Academic freedom prevents those who think or value differently from us from shutting us up or denying us resources. Academic freedom, then, functions to limit the pressures on our believing and valuing minds, save the pressures of evidence and argument. Since evidence and argument bear on the truth of belief and the soundness of values, those who value intellectual

autonomy are keen to collect evidence and to follow the arguments. But they wish to allow only evidence and argument to influence their cognitive and affective minds.

A university, one might hope, is a place at which people who value intellectual autonomy congregate so that they may pursue enquiry and study together. They wish to pursue enquiry and study together first of all because it's pleasant and stimulating to enquire into the world alongside others, especially others who share one's love of intellectual autonomy. But people congregate in universities also because they appreciate the benefits of constructive criticism. They recognize that by expressing one's thoughts to others, one comes to understand those thoughts better, both their weaknesses and their strengths. They desire to believe truly and to value soundly, and see criticism as useful in attaining what they desire.

A university in which academic freedom is valued as essential for intellectual autonomy will be a freer place, certainly, than a university in which academic freedom is valued solely for its role in discovering truth, disseminating knowledge, and caring for the university. This is because while academic freedom is essential to intellectual autonomy, it is merely useful to discovery, dissemination, and care. Indeed, as many have argued, the interests of discovery, dissemination, and care can sometimes best be furthered by limiting the freedom of members of the university community. Fruitless research, they note, does not help in the discovery of truth, while error and falsehood impede the dissemination of knowledge. Bad teaching wastes students' time and money. As for the care of the university, when professors say stupid things or reveal to the world the woes besetting their institutions, they do more harm than good to their universities.

Those who would limit the freedom of members of the university community in the interests of truth, knowledge, and the university think there is a sound principle by which they can draw limits around freedom without violating it. Academics, they say, are experts and professionals; the principle is that as experts and professionals, academics may properly be held accountable to the expert and professional standards relevant to their endeavours. They propose that the state of each discipline implies norms that one cannot violate without ceasing to be an expert in that discipline. A biologist committed to intelligent design, then, has given up real biology and, thereby, the academic freedom university biologists enjoy to pursue truth and to disseminate knowledge. Likewise, a teacher who violates in his classroom what his peers recognize as best practices should face sanctions if he doesn't reform his ways. An engineering professor who says publicly that few women study engineering because women are not as good as men in math is not speaking as an engineer but as an unaccredited cognitive psychologist; because she is not speaking about engineering, she may be directed by her dean to speak only the explanation approved by the faculty of engineering or keep quiet.

If, though, we value academic freedom as essential to a university community centred on intellectual autonomy, we cannot cite expert or professional standards or norms in responding to the ID biologists, unconventional graders, and offending engineers in our midst. At a university given to promoting intellectual autonomy, all these types and more would be enabled by academic freedom to continue as they wish.

Of course, a university is a sort of business, trading in money, power, and status. It collects money from students, governments, industry, and alumni, and pays professors to pursue research and to teach. It rewards students with degrees and professors with acknowledgements and promotions. How can it do all that properly when wide academic freedom would remove accountability from professors? How in a university marked by wide academic freedom is order and discipline to be maintained?

The answer is: through open critical discussion. If we keep alive at our institutions critical discussion of research, teaching, and the university, we will offer our colleagues all the care and stimulation they need to correct themselves should they go off track. If intelligent design is nonsense, that it is nonsense can be made known to the biology professor. If the unorthodox grading system is flawed, then its flaws can be made known to the professor who uses it. Of course, there's no guarantee that attitudes and practices will be changed by mere discussion, but among people concerned to understand the world and to teach others to understand the world, there's reason to believe that often enough they will. (We should at least be suspicious of the idea that requiring a professor to act against her better judgement will make her a better professor.)

I've compared and contrasted two accounts of the nature and purpose of academic freedom, and I declared that I prefer the one according to which academic freedom removes the pressures that can prevent us from believing and valuing for our own good reasons. I've expressed my contention that in a university organized around intellectual autonomy, critical discussion rather than oversight and control will do all that's needed to be done to ensure good research and teaching. I've said nothing, though, that might answer the question whether our culture is one in which universities dedicated to fostering intellectual autonomy might find public support.

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