

2024 Undergraduate Essay Contest First Place Winner

Aneesh Swaminathan, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

Seventy-three years after William F. Buckley Jr. penned his polemic, *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom,"* we find ourselves confronting the very problems in higher education that evoked the sharp rebuke of young Buckley and spurred a national conservative awakening: intellectual conformity, faux neutrality, and elite liberalism. Combined with a narrowing, ever-sensitive Overton window of "acceptable" ideas, remarks, or comments, these problems preclude free expression: the freedom, aptly put, to "think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable." However, is the solution "unfettered freedom?" Does unfettered freedom necessarily afford "intellectual gains?" While rejecting modern liberalism's ordination of civility and mutual respect over free expression, Buckley would have also dismissed solutions that fail to reaffirm the moral telos: free expression must be the means, not the overriding principle, to disseminate the ends—truth and knowledge. In other words, I contend that unfettered freedom is an absolutely necessary but insufficient means of intellectual discovery; free expression, especially at our educational institutions, must be bound by a normative force to the truth and guided by inculcated values.

Before considering whether or not "unfettered freedom" is required for intellectual discovery and whether certain considerations override intellectual gains afforded by free expression, we must answer two questions: 1) What is free expression? 2) What is "intellectual gain?" In its broadest definition, free expression is the unbridled liberty to think and speak one's mind, be heard, and participate in democratic society by all means. It also includes one's right to criticize, offend, and challenge. As such, any condition that censures or restrains these abilities violates free expression. Free expression has been a cornerstone of American democracy and the classical liberal tradition for centuries. Championed by Milton (1608-1674), Locke (1632-1704), and Voltaire (1694-1778) and influencing our Founding Fathers, tolerance, open discourse, and debate emerged from its noble ideal. Inviting great scientists like Joseph Priestly and thinkers like Thomas Paine to America was its enlightened practice. Yet, too often missed in our modern conception of free expression, however, is its impetus. What was the purpose of free expression? To what end, if any, was it to serve? In perhaps one of the most powerful early arguments for free expression, *Areopagitica* (1644), John Milton establishes that the telos of free expression was the "pursuit of Truth." Writing, "Truth is compared in Scripture to a streaming fountain; if her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition," Milton establishes free expression—and its corollary, open dialogue—as a necessity for the pursuit of "Truth" (Milton 43). In no uncertain terms, Milton clarifies that these capital "T" truths were the ultimate objectives of free expression and, thus, his prose. Free expression was the necessary means to arrive at the truth—not the end.

To Buckley, the ends, the "truths," were incontrovertible moral and philosophical standards. They were not meant to be debated or questioned; rather, they were to be distilled and disseminated as wisdom to preserve Western society and cultivate a virtuous citizenry. Rebuking John Stuart Mill's analogization of free expression as a "marketplace of ideas," Buckley writes, "Let truth and error do battle in the arena of ideas. Truth will vanquish. Let the student and the

citizen witness the struggle . . . and they will ally themselves with truth” (Buckley 156). Buckley believed that for a society to be virtuous, it must understand certain incontrovertible truths, like the moral and practical superiority of capitalism to communism, theism to atheism, and objectivism to relativism. Humans uncover these truths through their God-given reason and accept them through moral judgment. While he strongly advocated for free inquiry, he vociferously railed against falsities like communism from being given the same ground as capitalism. Laissez-faire free expression and laissez-faire education were wrong, as they tied the inviolable worth of truth to the whims of an imperfect public. Truth was not a commodity.

Drawing on Buckley’s wisdom, we must not prioritize nihilistic means over their moral ends. To religiously adhere to free expression is to abdicate responsibility to the truth. To abdicate responsibility to the truth is to create a void swiftly filled by the pernicious concoctions of liberalism: gender ideology as serious science, sex-reassignment as compassionate medicine, critical race theory as social gospel, revisionist history as explaining all of man’s disparities, or redistributive equity as superior to universal equality. As the cauldron for virtually all these concoctions, our universities play a unique role in perpetuating and imposing these falsities, top-down, onto their students, then government bureaucrats, and, eventually, the general public. Bound not by the pursuit of truth but by an illusion that “all ideas are created equal” and the personal conceits of their faculties, universities have replaced philosophy, the pursuit of objective truth, with ideology, the study of subjective “ideas.” Free expression and inquiry, thus, must be grounded by a normative force towards truth above all else—including civility, mutual respect, ethical, religious, and manneristic considerations. That is the unfettered freedom we need: the freedom required by and permissive to the pursuit of truth.

While Buckley believed in disseminating objective truths, he also recognized the “occasional apprehension of certain truths” (Intercollegiate Studies Institute 13:20). Since philosophy and inquiry are inherently dynamic, active processes, Buckley believed in the guiding role of “value inculcation” and strongly criticized “value-neutrality” and the “superstition” of academic freedom. He argues that “in the absence of demonstrable truth, the best we can do is to exercise the greatest diligence, humility, insight, intelligence, and industry in trying to arrive at the nearest values to truth. . . . having done this, we have an inescapable duty to seek to inculcate others with these values” (Buckley 156). In contrast to free expression absolutists, Buckley believed in value inculcation over value-neutrality as he believed in 1) the attainability and necessity and 2) only the occasional apprehension of truth—not that truth was inapprehensible, unobjective, or futile. He also believed that “academic freedom” was a “superstition” that served only to protect communists, normalize liberal indoctrination, and aid its proponents’ own agendas under the ostensibly noble guise of neutrality. Buckley, therefore, did not believe an institution nor its professors should be nor could ever be value-neutral.

Given this diagnosis, it follows that universities and society, in general, must come not to accept the facade of value-neutrality or unfettered free expression without a moral telos, but to actively champion and promulgate the truth. Doing so means that we conservatives must also not obfuscate the salient difference between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, liberalism and conservatism in our advocacy for “ideological diversity” or “heterodoxy.” Although it may be pragmatic or optically convenient, we must never confuse the true and sufficient ends for its insufficient means—the necessary free expression—or we risk subjugating ourselves to mere

“contrarians” with no affirmative vision. If our goal is to shift the Overton window towards accepting, or at least acknowledging, the conservatism we so deem closest to the truth, we cannot work within it; we must work from out. We must foster a culture where students and citizens, often silenced into reticence by prevailing norms and opprobrium, can freely engage with the truth. This is the real intellectual gain and the reason we champion free expression—not its teleological reverse.

Works Cited

1. Buckley, William F. *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of “Academic Freedom.”* Henry Regnery Company, 1951.
2. Milton, John. *Areopagitica.* Arc Manor, 2008.
3. “Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at Yale.” Yale College, yalecollege.yale.edu/get-know-yale-college/office-dean/reports/report-committee-freedom-expression-yale. Accessed 5 Oct. 2024.
4. YouTube, youtu.be/Lm9fURIYXMA?t=800. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.