

## 2024 Undergraduate Essay Contest Second Place Winner

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That intellectual discovery is predicated upon favoring free expression over civility and mutual respect is a proposition I generally approve of, but, in the context of the university, civility must remain paramount. By means of, first, an analysis of John Stuart Mill's capacious understanding of the value of free speech, then, second, a mixture of Hannah Arendt and Plato on education, I will delineate the extent to which free speech is a principle worth valuing.

The advantages of an absolutist regime of free speech are made most convincingly by Mill, who argues that the people have no right to attempt to control the speech of others by means of the law or social intolerance unless such speech directly incites a "mischievous act." Broadly speaking, Mill grounds his argument against the repression of speech on three main pillars: first, the suppression of dissenting opinions will inevitably suppress the truth; second, false opinions are a necessary condition for truth; and third, dissenting opinions may be partially true.

Regarding the first pillar, Mill believes that the majority is not infallible, and so a dissenting minority opinion is likely to be true and should therefore not be suppressed. He appeals to history as evidence, in which every observable "age has held opinions which subsequent ages have deemed to be false" —to ban dissenting opinions is to likely ban opinions that are correct and have the potential to improve society. Importantly, this is not a wholesale disapprobation of condemnation, as he distinguishes between believing in an opinion's truth and not allowing for its refutation. In other words, one can and should disagree with an opinion if it conflicts with their conscience, but should never disallow opposing opinions from being expressed.

This leads to Mill's second point: dissenting opinions are valuable even if they are false, for without them, the truth also becomes corrupted. To elaborate, disagreement is necessary because the strength of a judgment lies in its ability to be contested. Indeed, one can only believe an opinion to be true if they know that, if it were false, it could be disproven—something only possible in a free environment. Moreover, false opinions highlight the nature of true opinion in all its nuance and complexity, and so a ban on contrary viewpoints would cause truth to lose its full meaning. Repression is also counterproductive by its own standards according to Mill: rather than eliminating heresy, heresy would dangerously fester away from the public eye; conversely, in an environment of free speech heretical thought remains safely on the margins.

Finally, a third situation is possible: truth lies at the nexus of conflicting opinions, meaning that a dissenting opinion is valuable because, alongside the prevailing viewpoint, it is integral to the truth. Put simply, realizing that Mill associates truth with utility, the notion that dissenting opinions regardless of their truth value are always conducive to truth functions as a utilitarian case for why speech should be kept free.

This, then, in my eyes, makes a compelling argument for the necessity of free speech in the production of truth, the ultimate end of all intellectual pursuits. Therefore, *prima facie* this principle ought to pertain to the university in particular, the home of intellectual exploration.

However, I will now argue that the university, in its instructive capacity, is of a different nature and should be treated as an exception.

In the spirit of Hannah Arendt, schooling ought to concern itself with the world as it is, not as it should be. Under this paradigm, education interposes itself between the old and the new, mediating between tradition and the innovative spirit of youth. In the process, it assumes the dual obligation of protecting the old from the new—preventing it from being wrongfully discarded as obsolete dross—and safeguarding the new from the old, which subsists at continual risk of being smothered by the blind marching of custom. Achieving this double objective requires education to align itself with the status quo and to repudiate the change-oriented American spirit many of us hold so dear.

That is, an education of conservation preserves the old from the new by pointing out the claims of the world and the subtle provisions made for the preservation of social order that might otherwise be overlooked or discarded—think of the perspective of John Adams or Edmund Burke, i.e. great protectors of tradition. An authoritative education also protects the newness of the young from an ancient world by providing sufficient breathing space for growth and independence to exist. That is to say, an education that vests authority in tradition, though it may be imposing, nonetheless allows the young to gather in solidarity against the old and resist its overweening domination. The alternative is an education where authority is placed in the representatives of the new, i.e. the student peer group, which subjects individual students to a tyranny of the majority under which their individuality is at a far greater risk of being subdued. Allowing for radical freedom of expression, then, will defeat the objective of education as defined by Arendt. A vast array of ideas expressed in a disrespectful manner will not simply bounce around harmlessly, but will dilute those ideas which ought to be learned by students. Put differently, it will compromise students' ability to graduate and then participate genuinely in the radically free marketplace of ideas. Take Socrates from Plato's *Protagoras* and his criticism of sophistry: "The Sophist does not deceive us when he praises what he sells, like the dealers wholesale or retail who sell the food of the body; for they praise indiscriminately all their goods, without knowing what are really beneficial or hurtful: neither do their customers know, with the exception of any trainer or physician who may happen to buy of them." In other words, it is not merely the case that lies are a simple hindrance; rather, they are easily believed and can thereby implant harmful ideas in whoever falls victim to their arguments. What an education, in its representation of the past, ought to depict is moreover the proper form of intellectual discourse, which by nature is civil, providing a space in which competing arguments may interact.

Because of this consideration, namely, the end of the university, there ought to be greater constraints on the freedom of speech in that setting. The student is not yet equipped to engage fully with the marketplace of competing ideas; instead, they ought to be educated, which, put bluntly, means being told what to think. What this looks like in particular is unclear, and, as Arendt writes, it is especially difficult at present considering that we are in a crisis of tradition; having little faith in the past—justifiably so in many cases—it is unclear what students should learn. Yet, notwithstanding the difficulties, I am certain that incivility can never be permitted in education; unless we wish to produce a narrow-minded, hostile citizenry, especially insidious in a democracy like our own. Free speech is important and truth cannot thrive without it. But easily

forgotten is that education is not part of the political sphere; it has a specific duty which demands constraints on expression.