

## 2024 High School Essay Contest First Place Winner

Katie Qin, Princeton High School, Princeton, NJ

Freedom of speech does not exist in isolation; it unfolds like a ripple effect, creating waves of consequences that extend far beyond the initial act. This multilayered cascade can be broken down into thought, speech, conversation, debate, action, and eventual consequences—whether positive or negative. At any stage, a revision of thought can restart the process. Philosophy is not static but a dynamic pursuit where ideas evolve in nonlinear, sweeping ways with varying velocities. Free speech is both artful and terrifying, yet it defines the human experience.

The absence of free speech similarly shapes the human experience, highlighting the consequences of suppression, the capacity for self-control, and the resilience it fosters. While this lack of freedom may stifle certain forms of creativity, it does not necessarily impede intellectual growth, economic progress, or problem-solving abilities. I challenge the assertion that "the history of intellectual growth and discovery clearly demonstrates the need for unfettered freedom." What, after all, is "unfettered freedom," and is it truly necessary for fostering intellectual progress?

Consider China's rise to global superpower status, achieved without the same emphasis on free speech that Western societies prioritize for societal and economic advancement. This example calls into question conventional ideas about the necessity of free expression for societal progress. Must "unfettered freedom" always come at the expense of civility and respect in intellectual discovery? What do we really know about the relationship between free speech, governance, and societal progress? If the "unfettered freedom" needed for intellectual discovery sometimes favors free expression over "civility and mutual respect," it creates a false assumption that freedom must supersede respect on the path to innovation. China illustrates how human experience can be defined by collective harmony, economic achievement, and a different form of stability—rather than the open contest of ideas common in more liberal societies.

This contrast prompts a broader question: Who can definitively say one model of the human experience is superior, especially when we are all so deeply confined to our limited lived experiences? The idea that individuals in one society may be "happier" than those in another is elementary and subjective. I could, in this very essay, hypothesize a society where citizens receive daily doses of euphoria-inducing drugs. Would this make them the happiest society in the world? If so, does that make it the best society? Whether you agree or disagree, my point remains: subjective definitions of happiness or freedom do not conclusively determine the superiority of one culture over another.

Moreover, can one even be truly free in a society governed by hierarchical structures and social norms that penalize dissent? While the law may not punish you for voicing your thoughts, societal consequences—a key stage in the "cascade" of free speech—can be severe. Even if you find a like-minded group where you can speak freely, you may lose the freedom to engage with those outside that circle. And yet, America considers itself free. Is this the great illusion we've perpetuated since 1776?

"They are not free. We are free. We are better than them because of it." Us versus them: the "in-group" versus the "out-group." A tale as old as time. The prompt stating that to have "intellectual gains" we must have complete forms of "full expression" reinforces the United States' oversimplification of complex geopolitical situations into a moral struggle between good and evil, thus bolstering a sense of national identity and purpose (3).

The real question from the prompt should focus on the unique ecosystem of the American campus, as that is the context we are best equipped to address. Why are our campuses so polarized, and why is dialogue between opposing views so difficult? The answer lies in technology, which has exacerbated polarization. We no longer have to confront ideas we disagree with. When we encounter free speech in the real world, we are often shocked by it. Our response, though framed as free speech, is colored by emotionality due to the initial shock. The way we communicate has changed; we have lost the ability to be tactful, empathetic, and courteous.

In conclusion, while change often incites fear and resistance, particularly in philosophy and intellectual discourse, it is not inherently detrimental. The growing divide in our ability to engage meaningfully with opposing viewpoints is frequently attributed to technological advancements, but such evolution is inevitable. History shows that periods of tension often lead to profound innovations and shifts in thought. As Buckley's theory on free will suggests, the capacity to choose remains at the heart of human experience, and it is through navigating these uncertain times that we exercise our freedom to shape the future.

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