

2024 High School Essay Contest Second Place Winner

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The history of human intellectual growth and discovery indeed underscores the critical importance of freedom—freedom to think, to speak, to challenge accepted norms, and to explore the boundaries of human knowledge. The ability to express unpopular or unconventional ideas has been the driving force behind many of humanity’s greatest advancements. The statement, “The history of intellectual growth and discovery clearly demonstrates the need for unfettered freedom, the right to think the unthinkable, discuss the unmentionable, and challenge the unchallengeable” captures this truth, highlighting that the curtailment of free expression threatens not only the individual’s right to speak, but also the collective right to engage with diverse perspectives.

Throughout history, periods of profound intellectual and scientific growth have been those where freedom of thought and expression flourished. Conversely, societies that have restricted or punished free expression have often stagnated or regressed. This relationship between freedom and progress is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the fields of science, philosophy, and politics, where challenging conventional wisdom has led to paradigm shifts and breakthroughs.

Take, for example, the Scientific Revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries. Figures such as Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus, and Isaac Newton were instrumental in transforming humanity’s understanding of the universe. Their work directly challenged the dominant worldview of their time, which was deeply influenced by the teachings of the Church. Copernicus’ heliocentric theory, which posited that the Earth revolved around the sun, was a direct challenge to the geocentric model that had been widely accepted for centuries. Galileo’s support for Copernicanism, and his subsequent trial by the Inquisition, illustrates the dangers of curtailing intellectual freedom. Had Galileo been silenced entirely, progress in the field of astronomy would have been delayed significantly. The ability to challenge “the unchallengeable”—in this case, the Church’s authority on cosmological matters—was essential for the advancement of human knowledge.

Similarly, the Enlightenment of the 18th century was a period marked by an explosion of intellectual growth, largely because thinkers were increasingly free to question traditional authority and engage in open debate. Philosophers such as John Locke, Voltaire, and Immanuel Kant argued for individual rights, the separation of powers, and the importance of reason. Their ideas laid the foundation for modern democratic governance and the recognition of universal human rights. The ability to discuss the “unmentionable”—including the critique of monarchies, the Church, and entrenched social hierarchies—was fundamental to the political revolutions that followed, particularly the American and French Revolutions. These upheavals reshaped the political landscape of the Western world, promoting ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

The suppression of free expression, on the other hand, has often led to intellectual stagnation and social decay. One of the most infamous examples of this is the control of thought and speech in totalitarian regimes. In Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union under Stalin, dissenting voices were

ruthlessly silenced. Books were banned or burned, and intellectuals who dared to think critically or express views contrary to the official state ideology were imprisoned, exiled, or executed. The result was not only a climate of fear and repression, but also a dramatic stifling of innovation and creativity. The loss of diverse perspectives and the enforcement of a single, unquestionable narrative robbed these societies of the intellectual vitality that is necessary for progress.

The issue of intellectual freedom is not limited to extreme historical cases. Even in modern democratic societies, where free expression is often taken for granted, there are ongoing debates about the limits of free speech. For instance, the rise of “cancel culture” and the increasing pressure on universities to restrict controversial speakers have sparked concerns about the erosion of intellectual freedom. While it is essential to create spaces where marginalized voices are protected and respected, there is a fine line between preventing harm and stifling debate. When unpopular or uncomfortable ideas are censored, the entire society loses an opportunity to engage in critical reflection and growth. As John Stuart Mill argued in his seminal work *On Liberty*, even false or harmful ideas should be allowed expression because their refutation strengthens the truth. By depriving others of the right to listen to alternative viewpoints, we rob ourselves of the opportunity to test and reaffirm our beliefs.

It is important to recognize that freedom of expression does not mean that all ideas are equally valid or beyond criticism. On the contrary, free expression thrives in an environment of rigorous debate, where ideas can be scrutinized, challenged, and refined. Intellectual freedom involves not just the right to speak, but also the responsibility to engage thoughtfully with opposing views. It is through this process of debate and dialogue that societies grow intellectually and morally.

Moreover, the ability to challenge authority is particularly important in the context of scientific and technological advancements. Today, humanity faces unprecedented challenges, from climate change to artificial intelligence to pandemics. Addressing these issues will require bold thinking and innovative solutions. If we are to navigate the complexities of the modern world, we must preserve the right to “think the unthinkable” and “challenge the unchallengeable.” Innovation often arises from questioning established assumptions, and the solutions to tomorrow’s problems may come from the ideas that seem radical or unpopular today.

In conclusion, the history of intellectual growth and discovery makes a compelling case for the necessity of unfettered freedom of thought and expression. To limit the right to think and speak freely is to limit humanity’s potential for growth, progress, and understanding. The suppression of unpopular views strikes at the very heart of intellectual freedom, not only silencing individual voices but also depriving society of the opportunity to listen, engage, and evolve. True progress depends on our collective willingness to engage with diverse perspectives, no matter how unthinkable, unmentionable, or unchallengeable they may seem.