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O’Hanlon Essay

FREE SPEECH, THE UNIVERSITY, AND THE EXAMINED LIFE

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To know the responsibility of a university to free speech, civil discourse, and our communities, we must begin with discussing the purpose of a university. We cannot know its responsibility if we do not know why it is here in the first place.

Is it for economic advancement? While university graduates often earn more on average over the course of a lifetime than those who do not attend college, anyone can make a great living working in the trades without accumulating the kind of debt it takes to get a college degree (National Center for Education Statistics 2017). App and website design, online stores, and programming have created more high school millionaires than we can fathom. There are plenty of other avenues to wealth in the information based economy in which we live. The pursuit of economic advancement therefore cannot explain why many come to the university and ultimately forsake high earning careers for long lives of selfless service and care. So while attending a university may facilitate economic advancement, it is not the sole option, especially when doing so sometimes calls economic advancement into question.

What about a thriving social life? While most of us make lasting friendships during our time in college, there are a great many civic organizations like churches, synagogues, mosques, or fraternal organizations that populate the civil society and cultivate bonds much deeper and long lasting than the university does (Lim and Putnam 2010).

For many athletes, college offers the opportunity of athletics, the next step in the chase of the dream to stand under the lights at Fenway. Schools spend millions on scholarships and grand stadiums. They honor and lift up athletes as school heroes. However, most students do not bother with athletics and most athletes never make it to "the Show" (Morgan 2012).

If the primary purpose of a college or university is not economic achievement, attaining social influence, or athletic achievement, then what is left? What is the purpose of our being here if not for chasing wealth, status, influence, power, or prestige? Why pay thousands of dollars to sit through hundreds of hours of class, some seemingly relevant to our lives and some not? Why read old dusty books originally written in dead languages by dead men and women?

The Purpose of the University and a Liberal Arts Education

Part of the answer is the name "university." John Henry Newman pointed to the name "university" as a guidepost signaling its purpose. The purpose of a university is to teach universal knowledge. The university is a community of teachers and scholars who come together in the pursuit of knowledge and truth. It is not merely for instrumental purposes, but because the pursuit and attainment of knowledge and truth is good for us in its own right. To again borrow from Newman,

> "Knowledge is capable of being its own end. Such is the constitution of the human mind, that any kind of knowledge, if it be really such, is its own reward" (Newman 1854, 103).

Truth inherently enriches and ennobles us. It is, as Harvard philosophy professor Dr. Cornel West says, why we choose "a deep integrity over cheap popularity." It compels us to sometimes reject the brass rings of wealth, power, status, and material things in the name of seeking truth, justice, and integrity (West and George 2015).

The idea of the pursuit of knowledge as its own reward for our enrichment is at the heart of what the university is meant to teach. It is at the heart of what Socrates called the "examined life" (Plato, 38a). An education in the examined life exposes us to different times, places, and thinkers who have wrestled with the pursuit of truth long before we ever began our own journey, thinkers who have attempted to live examined lives. To listen and learn from the greats like Plato, Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, King, Soyinka, Christ, the Buddha, or Dostoevsky because we have so much to learn from them shows the way and charts the course (West and George 2015).

Engagement with these great thinkers helps us develop the self-critical attitude necessary to live the examined life. They force us to confront our own prejudices, biases, and presuppositions about others or the world. Sometimes they expose those presuppositions to be just and, at other times,

unjust. The self-critical attitude generates, in ourselves and in fellow truth-seekers on our same journey, the intellectual virtues necessary to partake in university life and civil discourse. Dr. West describes it as the ability to ask self-critical questions, and, as you engage in the journey of your life, to identify what path will you choose and what choices will you make, creating the person you ultimately become (West and George 2016).

The examined life is as important as the unexamined life is dangerous. In fact, Socrates says the unexamined life may not even be worth living at all (Plato, 38b). Perhaps the unexamined life is not worth living because it is perpetually uncommitted. It is merely resigned to a life of complacency and conformity in line with dominant forces, regardless of whether they are just, righteous, or truthful (West and George 2015). No society can survive if its population is committed to living an unexamined life. Our civilization, our shared American experiment, would turn into "the survival of the slickest" (West and George 2016). Without proper self-critical realization and a life spent in dialogue with other truth seekers, man normally falls into the abyss of persuasion and pleasure. If we desire to ensure order in the commonwealth, we cannot do so without first ensuring order of the individual in his own soul (Kirk 1953).

With this picture in mind, we can begin to see that civil discourse, free speech, concern for this shared community, and civic learning do not have to be competing interests as some might think. They are instead equal pieces

of the puzzle. They are necessary conditions of academia, which benefit each and every person universally in our shared pursuit of truth seeking.

The Responsibility of the University

Universities have a unique responsibility to academic discourse, a concept reinforced by Supreme Court rulings such as *Rosenberger V. Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia,* requires universities to treat student led organizations equally, regardless of the controversial nature of their views (*Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of University of Virginia*, 515 U.S. 819. (1995)). That unique responsibility is twofold: (1) imparting universal knowledge and (2) creating an atmosphere which ensures and protects the pursuit of the examined life (George, Academic Freedom and Liberal Arts Ideals 2016).

Imparting universal knowledge includes protecting the pursuit of truth and following arguments, logic, and evidence to their ends and conclusions wherever they lead. The pursuit of truth is to be protected, regardless of how we, as individuals or as a community, may feel about such discoveries. The university must be able to preserve knowledge and information acquired in the pursuit of truth. It must not be subject to censorship or sanitization merely because certain orthodoxies, whether on or off campus, deem such knowledge problematic. Knowledge and those who seek it must not be pushed off or suppressed on campus. If knowledge is good for us in more than a merely instrumental fashion, and all knowledge benefits us, then the

exclusion of unpopular knowledge cheats students, faculty, and wider audiences of their engagement and understanding. The university requires this community of teachers and scholars to engage with and teach one another. It requires a community which values truth-seeking above all else. If the community of scholars who make up the university are incapable of honest conversation, then we are not scholars but sophists. Stated simply, imparting universal knowledge includes the pursuit of knowledge, preservation of knowledge once securely obtained, and the transmission of knowledge.

The second purpose supports and ensures the first purpose. The second purpose of a university includes the responsibility to cultivate virtues such as intellectual humility. Such virtues allow the university to remain a place of free inquiry, free discussion, community, and genuine friendship for all who enter its campus. Without the cultivation of these virtues, the university cannot remain free (George, Academic Freedom and Liberal Arts Ideals 2016).

Intellectual humility must be cultivated within a university system because it is required for free discussion and free inquiry. This virtue forces us to accept the idea that we could possibly be wrong about anything, including even our most deeply held, cherished, and identity forming beliefs. Humility is an understanding that we are imperfect and fallible. Our reasoning can be, and is often, wrong about many things. Intellectual

humility is critical for the understanding of free speech and, as J.S. Mill describes it, "the liberty of thought and discussion" (Mill 1869).

The liberty of thought and discussion acknowledges that not only are we many times wrong, but we rarely seek out evidence that challenges our own opinions. We often fall in love with our own ideas and beliefs. It is so difficult for us to acknowledge, as Dr. Cornel West says, that our imperfections signify our ability to own wrong or incomplete ideas (West and George 2016). Much in the same vein of Dr. West was the great jurist Learned Hand who said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of never quite being too sure that one is right (Hand 1944). This was not an endorsement of radical skepticism or relativism; rather, Hand was pointing to the virtue of intellectual humility when approaching controversial topics of governance and liberty in light of human fallibility (George, Academic Freedom and Liberal Arts Ideals 2016). That same approach and virtue is required of the university and its personnel in its pursuit of truth.

The Heart of our Conflict

The heart of the conflict we see in universities across the country is a failure in the third piece of imparting universal knowledge, specifically the transmission of knowledge (George, Academic Freedom and Liberal Arts Ideals 2016). The transmission of knowledge means confronting students, faculty, and the wider community with and forcing them to have the opportunity to consider the very best that is to be said on competing sides of

all issues in dispute among reasonable people of good will. To deprive the university, especially its students, of reasoning and argumentation of competing viewpoints, is to cheat them of knowledge from which they would benefit. After all, universal knowledge includes much more than "the facts," which can sometimes be just campus orthodoxy in disguise. Universal knowledge includes the reasons, arguments, presuppositions, and every other piece of the puzzle that we encounter on the road to understanding not just that reasonable people of good will come down on different sides of important issues, but also why reasonable people of good will come down on different sides of important issues (George, Conscience and Its Enemies 2016).

Much criticism surrounding the failure to ensure free speech in the face of authoritarian campus orthodoxies centers on the unfair treatment of certain dissenting philosophies. These criticisms point to dissenting philosophies as underrepresented and targeted in universities settings. Often silenced or shut down, they propose, if given the same platform, there would be less incivility on campus due to an exposure and consideration of differing viewpoints. These critiques are partially true, though they ultimately miss the mark. The threat to the purpose of the university is greater than simple unfairness to one competing philosophy (George 2016). The incivility at the heart of universities is not unfairness, though authoritarian impulses abound in certain campus orthodoxies (Haidt 2017). The incivility at the heart of

campus conflict is due to those things J.S. Mill referred to as "dead dogmas" (Mill 1869).

Allowing campus orthodoxies to go unchallenged allows prevailing opinions to harden into dogmas that leave students with the impression that there are no reasonable disputes among people of good will. In allowing these hardened dogmas to persist, we create narrow-minded and arrogant ideologues, even if the dogmas are ultimately true! Allowing students to go unchallenged will prevent them from understanding and utilizing the truth as deeply as they otherwise would. (Mill 1869). It prevents them from knowing not just that something is true, but why that something is true and understanding why wrong arguments attract or are taken up by their interlocutors (George, Academic Freedom and Liberal Arts Ideals 2016). Mill in *On Liberty* states:

> "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion… Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them…he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form" (Mill 1869).

The unfortunate manifestation of this dogmatism is clearly seen when speakers are denied a platform or uninvited, when ideologues shut down and prevent speakers with whom they disagree, or when teachers are forced to sanitize material in their classes to avoid distressed student initiated university inquisitions undertaken in the name of protecting students (Haidt,, et al. 2016). While these manifestations are more obvious and derided, they are not the only manifestations. In retaliation against disinvitations and speaker interruptions, some students and groups become more belligerent. They purposely troll fellow students with inflammatory action or campus speakers, meant only to provoke anger rather than to educate or engage (Waldman 2017). Each of these responses undermines the purpose of the university.

Doubt, Care, and Community

As a community, we seek to be gracious with one another. We are for the liberty of thought and discussion and that idea is quite specific. It does not include unlimited speech. Unlimited speech does not include hurling abuse at one another, name calling, or throwing epithets. These things are not reasons and arguments and are not the currency of academic discourse (West and George 2015). This unlimited speech, especially that which advocates violence, is also not protected speech under the Constitution *(Schenck V United States 1919)*. Anyone who resorts to such base

misconduct should not be tolerated within the halls of academia. This abuse is also a distortion of our common purpose at an institution of liberal arts learning.

The pursuit of truth is not something one can do alone. It requires a community. “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend” (Proverbs, 27: 17). It requires engagement and participation from different stripes, colors, and ideas. Critical to this understanding of community is the acknowledgement of our interlocutors, not as enemies to be conquered but as friends seeking the same truth we seek. If we own the wrong position on some issue and we are ultimately corrected by our interlocutor, we shouldn’t be ashamed, embarrassed, or angry. We have been given a gift of the truth. The friendships forged in the common journey of seeking the truth shouldn’t be discouraged for fear of offense, they should be encouraged in order to foster mutual understanding (West and George 2015).

How does that mutual benefit and friendship that comes with truth seeking manage encountering viewpoints which are possibly harmful? Engagement with views which may seem to seek the abolition of one's views, identity, or deeply held beliefs is rarely enjoyable. Often controversial speakers use sharp words, not as scalpels but as shivs. Those on the receiving end of those jabs are left anxious and distraught. It's not fun. It certainly never feels good.

New social science research has begun to make connections between stress, language, non-physical stimuli effects on the human body and the possibility of shortened life expectancies. Lisa Feldman Barrett, distinguished professor of psychology at Northeastern University, recently made some connections in *The New York Times* in an attempt to explain the best arguments put forth by free-speech critics for restricting campus speaker invitations. The weightiest scenarios involve the bodily response to distressing environments causing the unraveling of ones' telomeres (Feldman Barrett 2017).

Telomeres are structures at the ends of chromosomes that protect them from deterioration. As telomeres shrink during cell division, we age. That is the normal process. Shortened telomeres result in reduced life span (Feldman Barrett 2017).

If words can cause stress and certain levels of stress can unravel one's telomeres, the parts of one's body which contribute to longevity, it is reasonable to understand why this would lead someone to believe that not all words or discourse should be permitted. In this scenario, each word spoken has the potential of chipping time off someone's life.

Encounters with environments where controversial, unsettling, and unnerving topics are present would be labeled as possibly dangerous or hazardous. It would be reasonable for students to be forewarned to avoid potential biological damage. If true, then we should label and warn to

ensure the longest telomeres, and subsequent life span, for our compatriots and friends. Speakers who create or contribute to this kind of toxic stress shouldn't be permitted to speak on campus.

This argument ultimately misses the mark for two reasons. First, stress must be toxic stress to have the aforementioned unraveling effect on human genetics. Toxic stress has more to do with long term exposure in a specific harmful environment. Long term exposure does not include events which may last for a few hours. Events on campus where even the vilest of speakers present rarely last more than a few hours. This is hardly enough time to create an environment of toxic stress within students. If toxic stress does live on campus, it is not due to controversial speakers (Haidt and Lukianoff, "Why It's a Bad Idea to Tell Students Words are Violence" 2017).

The second, and far more important, reason relates to the critical approach to solving problems. Critical approaches falter because their reasoning ends just as they meet the problem. Once speech is viewed merely as something that has the potential to harm, the case is closed. Speech in its entirety is then labeled as violent or dangerous. Ignored is the possibility that stressors have the greater potential to build up, rather than just tear down. College students are viewed as fragile things, who ought to be protected from major stressors and struggles (Haidt, The Coddling of the American Mind 2015). While this is most often done out of a genuine concern, when we coddle budding adults too much, it can ultimately stunt

growth. Human beings are unique in that uncertainty, stressors, shocks, and volatility can result in tremendous growth. Human beings can learn to adapt to these events and benefit from them far more than any harm they might incur. This is the notion of "Anti-Fragility" (Taleb 2014).

Anti-Fragility is the term coined by Nassim Taleb in his best-selling book by the same name and in several academic papers. Anti-fragility describes a concept in which something, human beings for our purposes, gain or grow from negative stressors. This is different from concepts of robustness in which something is resistant or unmoved by negative stressors. Life inevitably throws "black swans," Taleb's word for unexpected and life-altering events, at each one of us. Instead of wilting at the challenge, the anti-fragile human can, and ought to, adapt, embrace, and thrive under the challenge.

Critics of free speech ignore the anti-fragile nature of humanity. Human beings benefit from challenge and volatility. True growth does not always feel good. We do not always appreciate the winnowing moments we go through in life which cause us to question our own identities and deeply held beliefs, religious or otherwise. However, if we engage thoroughly with our interlocutor, at the other end of the tunnel we always come out better off and more knowledgeable, even if our ideals may be altered. The purpose of the university isn't to make us feel comfortable. The university is not a space which makes any of us feel safe. It is a space which riles and

dislodges us from our comfortable ruts. It makes us feel vulnerable, yet it helps us grow.

The Responsibility of the University

Truth seeking binds us together. It is what the community of scholars at a university unites around. The questions we encounter on that road are the questions we all wrestle and contend with. It is why a play written by an African atheist from Nigeria can resonate so well with an American Christian living in Arkansas or why a 21st century Syrian refugee can find such meaning through the allegory of a 14th century Italian poet exiled from his home. These questions are deeper than skin color, deeper than nationality, deeper than party affiliation— they are a part of our shared experience as human beings.

In light of our pursuit of the examined life, in light of our duties as truth seekers, and in light of our human fallibility, universities ought to engage speakers of all stripes, colors, and ideologies. Any speaker who agrees to enter the university atmosphere should be allowed, met, and engaged regardless of their viewpoint. Regardless of how offensive, outraged, or incredible individuals on campus find someone's viewpoint, if they are willing to come to campus and present in the currency of academic discourse, reasons and arguments, then they ought to be allowed to speak. They should be able to speak even when their views are abominable to us,

even when their arguments and ideas challenge or threaten those things we hold most dear, the deepest identity forming and lived beliefs.

Princeton University's McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence, Dr. Robert P. George, summarizes this succinctly when speaking of his famous infanticide advocating colleague, Bioethicist Dr. Peter Singer. Dr. George says:

> "In the university context, in the context of truth seeking, he has more than the right to say it. As terrible as I may think it is. He's got the right to have me listen and thoughtfully consider what he has to say. Our devotion to truth should be so powerful that we are willing to do that. Because it is conceivable that even an opinion that strikes us…as so abominable could be right. And even if it's wrong, we have something to learn from confronting the very best reasons that a very intelligent person could induce." (West and George 2015)

The utilization of the university for any purpose other than to impart universal knowledge and cultivation of its supporting virtues violates the university's mission and the trust of the culture in which it resides. More so, the university that violates these purposes is doomed to cultivate ideologues, sophists, and conflict that will eventually consume that institution. The solution to our campus conflicts will only be alleviated when we decide to seek out the old virtues of the university and bring them back into the light. The university must set its face toward its original mission as

the place where universal knowledge is taught, where virtues are cultivated, ideals are transmitted, and the liberty of thought and discussion is welcome.

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