

On Academic Freedom: A Discussion of Academic Freedom and the Issues Surrounding it

Introduction

In recent times, academic freedom has become a popular topic of debate. Unfortunately it seems that most who would take the side of control measures and oversight being put in place are somehow in affiliation with the administrative levels of the academy, and so they may be discouraged to speak candidly about their own opinions on such matters. From my own experience, I can certainly say that being tasked with the study of philosophy in the context of the liberal arts faculty of a university can be weary to the philosophy student who is actually dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge. The same can be said for the arts, in general. Nowadays most Arts students are steeped in so much rubbish that it is very difficult to make any headway in the pursuit of knowledge. Not only that, but the narrative which professors in the arts are nowadays compelled and sometimes and unfortunately often coerced to teach are saturated with ideological biases, which are typically left wing in their politics, despite existing in the context of nation that is capitalist. Ironically, the capitalist system which these pseudo-leftists detest actually sustains itself in part by what is accomplished by the divisive identity politics and views that are being pushed in these institutions, as it is easier to control and manipulate a confused and divided population. This practice of university indoctrination implements divide and rule and distraction tactics. Safe spaces, and other measures, have been put into place by the administrative levels at universities, as a means to control the cultivation of minds so as to make them suitable for contemporary academia, and doing well in the context of a capitalist society. To properly evaluate and assess the situation regarding academic freedom, I think that a broad assessment must first be made of the control measures which are already put in place in our learning environments. I will also discuss one of my own recent experiences of dealing with barriers imposed against my own academic freedom.

Institutional Limitations on Academic Freedom

The problems of academic corruption and ideological politicization of the academy are closely related to the issue of academic freedom being restricted, by means both tacit and manifest. The discussion involving the struggle for academic freedom on in our schools should not be limited to focusing on cases of explicit censorship and reprimand, although they are important. It is crucial that we also examine the current state of affairs in relation to the corruption of the academy, in order to better understand the situation as a whole, and so that we are able to recognize the lack of academic freedom in terms of its symptoms. I believe that the attack on academic freedom is heavily en-grained in our education system, that it is systemic, and cannot be adequately understood without also examining its political and ideological sources and motivations. One notable symptom which presents itself in the absence of a fundamental and adequate basis of academic freedom, is that bold thinking is discouraged, and the stagnation of ideas is promoted in the classroom. It seems that the way things are these days, if a student produces an essay or presents an opinion in the classroom on a politically charged topic which challenges the view which is deemed politically acceptable according to their institution, they may, and often are, subject to criticism which is not academic in its nature or just a dismissal of their idea altogether, as something that is 'inappropriate' or 'unacceptable'. This can be devastating to a student who works hard and produces high quality work which is undervalued, unfairly criticized, and marked with a poor grade as a result of its lack of conformity to the ideological and/or political stances which are being encouraged. As a result of these controlled learning conditions, and in conjunction with the largely unchanged structure of our classical education system, which remains a system predominantly geared towards the training of students so as to make them suitable for mundane work, like factory labor in the industrial age when the system was devised. The result is that most students cannot, and do not want to, get beyond regurgitating what they remember being taught in one

class or another. This unfortunate truth is paramount in what the university has become: the epicenter of ideological and political indoctrination in developed societies.

In examining the issue of academic freedom we must also focus on the course system itself, combined with a failure to separate teaching from evaluation of students. A failure to have such a distinction, muddles actual learning progress with other abilities, such as the ability to cram for an exam, regurgitation, memorization of uninteresting facts, knowing the kind of answer your professor prefers, and etc. We can look to the methods of Oxbridge to see how to provide for and promote students' academic freedom within the structure of their education: tutors are chosen by the students, they only argue rationally with the student, they do not award grades, there are no courses, the student is free to use any methods to achieve competence in his/her chosen field, and does not know in advance who the examiners will be, nor who evaluate him or her at the end of the period of study. In the way this system works, the students cannot pander to the examiners, and the examiners cannot expect to be pandered to; this means that both have to rely on rational criteria, which is what educational systems should be fundamentally based on, as opposed to criteria which are influenced by social ideology and politics. The fact that students hate to write exams is another phenomena that is explainable in terms of the ramification towards academic freedom. Examination papers are often geared towards drastically reduce the student's academic freedom, by requiring that certain books/topics be studied. Thus examination questions ought to be general enough to accommodate very different study choices, however, this is not the way they are conducted in institutions where academic freedom is misunderstood or undervalued.

What Is Academic Freedom?

Although a broad and complex topic the notion of academic freedom itself is relatively simple. It is a value which when upheld, prevents academics from being told what to say, and also provides for academic works of sufficient merit to be presented in academic for a, regardless of the social and/or political ramifications doing so might have, among-st other things. A person who values academic freedom would hold the view that the truth should not be distorted for the sake of furthering any sort of political goals, eg. Protecting the feelings of certain people. In understanding what academic freedom is, it is also useful to distinguish it from the more simplistic concept of freedom of expression. Academics should be free to present their research and views in academic contexts, so long as they are in fact of academic merit, and not if they aren't. Academic freedom does not include the freedom to put an academic veneer on things which are not academic. It is a freedom which must be exercised responsibly, like other freedoms.

The way I see it, the student who enjoys academic freedom is able to learn in an environment where their learning is not being compelled or coerced, on an ideological or political basis, or by any other means. That is what it means, for an approach to learning to be 'strictly academic'. But, unfortunately our learning is being compelled, and this is reflected very much in terms of the kind of student work for which we are rewarded for doing. In a different context (such as a letter written to a parent) the materials produced for the average liberal arts essay would often be seen as indicative of insanity, but it does seem sane to produce material that one is rewarded for producing, and it is also rewarding to be seen as being on 'the right side' of any political issue, even when accomplishing these things my forgo certain realities, like the way in which gender studies classes (which by the way, do not even attempt to teach about the realities of the two genders, but are instead a claptrap of postmarxism, neoliberalism and other ideologies) undermine the established knowledge of fields of research like evolutionary biology and human physiology. To present examples and arguments which illustrate those realities may often be at odds with the ideological narrative being pushed, so as a result, students whose

work is in line with the accepted narrative are rewarded, even when their motivations are other than to understand the situation with keen accuracy. Those who have nuanced opinions on such matters are marginalized and may even be condemned by the class and the instructor. This is not what academic freedom should look like, especially not in the context of a university, where students should be mature enough to engage in thoughts and ideas even if they find them disagreeable or unsettling.

The Attack on Academic Freedom in the Liberal Arts

The extent of the attack being mounted on education should be noted, because in a genuinely educational setting there would be no control measure's put in place by the instructor or the administrative level of the university when it came to interpretation of the presented content and the learner would be free to apply his or her own logic in it's analysis and in applying the knowledge they have been able acquire. One could justifiably argue that many subject areas in the liberal arts, such as queer theory and gender studies, ought to be abandoned entirely, at least insofar as they exist presently, as only subversive to applying academic discipline and logic. Although in practicality, fewer students may ever actually experience direct censorship of their thoughts and ideas, I take the position that academic freedom is being infringed upon in a much more fundamental way, which involves a strategic gutting of the education system and the tacit political and ideological indoctrination for which it is used as a vehicle of delivery. Notably, the approaches to learning which involve a practice of rigorous logic and analytic thinking have been reserved for students in the STEMs, who are conveniently denied a proper literacy in the issues of the humanities, by the curriculum, so that they will follow the instructions of the power group, in the development of sciences and technologies, without questioning, or even caring about, what their work will be used for. It is made to be as mundane as possible. Likewise, students in the arts, who do focus on politically and ideologically charged topics, are largely denied the that same rigorous and systematic approach to learning, and the topics are framed in provocative and exciting ways which are often entirely nonsensical. I think that this is one of the most powerful ways in which academic freedom is being systemically infringed upon.

To break away from this, the training regiment of the liberal arts, if one should so desire, one simply has to proceed in engaging with the learning materials as one would in a non-“academic” context, dealing with issues in a rational and common sense way. It may seem very counter intuitive, and indeed it may well be, given the current state of affairs in academia, but to rise above the janitorial level (which is generally superior to that of the “academy”) one of course needs to learn and study logic, practical methods of conceptual analysis, read the best work on his or her subject area, and to write extensively, because our capacity to think without writing is limited. It is not surprising that in the context of controlled learning of university's where education has been sabotaged, the amount of writing encouraged to do as practice has become very limited. Nowadays many Arts Students produce material which springs from urges other than the urge to represent reality accurately, which should be the goal in pursuing knowledge, and in many cases this material is grossly at odds with the evidence and/or confused.

At this point, we might be inclined to wonder, why don't more student's realize that their academic freedom is being infringed upon to such a great extent? Well for one thing, students are encouraged by the structure of the learning environment to only care about things like the grades that we get, how difficult our classes are, and etc. Unfortunately most people, and especially naive arts students, very much want to believe that they are being exposed to very valuable material, and it is easy to convince those who choose to take philosophy that they are benefiting merely by being exposed to the much-revered texts. A student in the university certainly has motivation to want to believe that their class lessons are valuable, after all, they are very expensive! One can make a comparison with exposure

to the Latin mass of people who know no Latin. Such is the way of much of the materials which are presented within the context of the arts. While the odd instructor or student peer might recognize a logical and analytic approach as an appropriate way to engage in the course materials, which may often lead to dismissing them as nonsense, in the common context of a class such materials are being introduced as the works of an esteemed intellectual, and so the view is promoted that the ideas presented are very valuable, and that they must surely contain great insights. So, to disregard them as the nonsense they are is not likely to lead to getting good grades, or to class discussion that is considered 'fruitful'. The students have been trained to try to explore these rabbit holes and don't typically appreciate efforts to make it less mystifying, or any sort of dissenting criticism like 'this is nonsense'. The best answers – or more specifically, the answers students are and feel most rewarded for producing – will be the one's which are not dissenting towards the material, but rather make it seem even more intriguing and fancy than it already is, by expanding upon it, or one of its details, and use of flowery language and undefined terms and concepts helps accomplish this. Indeed, in the context of the arts, such kinds of academic work are heavily romanticized, and going deep into rabbit holes in order to try to make a 'meaningful' interpretation of such things is what the instructors are looking for, more so than a rejection of the idea, or questioning of the quality of the information being presented. In this way, we can see that academic freedom has been oppressed in a very powerful way: we are being encouraged, as academics, to entertain ridiculous ideas, rather than critically engage in important educational topics.

Personal Experience

To provide an example of the kinds of infringement of academic freedom I am talking about today, I will share an experience recently had, during last semester here at Saint Mary's. I had submitted an abstract for a panel presentation at a recent conference here at Saint Mary's: Playgrounds & Podiums: Contemporary issues in Sport. The topic I chose to write about was gender in sport, and in my abstract I took the position that a gendered categorization of athletes, based on biological metrics, was needed to ensure fairness of competition in competitive sports. Unsurprisingly, I received notice that my submission "could not be accepted", as it was at odds with the politically correct views and ideology surrounding gender these days, but when I asked why it had been refused, what I got was a very long-winded response which had framed the conference as hyper-academic, so as to justify their decision, and they also criticized me for questioning why mine had been refused. One of the biggest objections I had to their decision, was that an entirely non-academic political sports organization, a local roller derby, which emphasizes the importance of 'gender-expansion', was allowed to present on the very same topic, but their presentation entirely lacked research and empirical data. They even introduced themselves as not being an academic group! The sharply worded exchange of emails between myself and the organization committee of this 'academic' conference, regarding the rejection of my submission, is very revealing of the corruption of the university, and illustrates my point that the achievement of academic excellence is being compromised for the sake of propagation of desired ideological and political narratives. At this point it may be useful to refer to the other handout containing the email exchange I am describing, which also includes the abstract that had been rejected, so that you can read it for yourselves and develop your own opinions. I believe it is a very valuable example of the ways in which academic freedom is infringed upon, because it showcases a wide variety of the symptoms of suppression of academic freedom.

By those who sympathize with the pseudo-academics who are engaging in political action rather than academic affairs, the concept of academic freedom is usually deployed simplistically. In my own case, when I sought help in dealing with the suppression of my academic freedom, I was told that the organizers of the panel were acting appropriately within the boundaries of their own academic freedom,

in refusing my presentation as well as deciding which views they wanted to include. Sure, sometimes there are far too many applicants for a panel conference (although in my situation, I am sure that there was plenty of room) and so decisions have to be made and some people have to be cut, however if in doing so, the organizing group unilaterally suppresses one particular view in favor of another, that can hardly be classified as an exercise of academic freedom, as it is not academic to do so. Real scientists are not free to talk and publish rubbish, in the name of academic freedom. And what good is the academic freedom of economists if at economist conferences, they are all selected for their willingness to tell lies about the economy? Something that clearly needs better understanding is a comprehension of the rules that are actually operative in a discipline, and about the rules that ought to apply. It is outrageous to defend the power of people to suppress well-founded contributions to a subject and put an academic veneer on propaganda and ideology, which was overwhelmingly the case at the recent playgrounds and podiums conference.

Academics or Political Operatives?

The takeover of universities by pseudo-academics who are primarily political activists, serving as a means of lining people up behind politicians controlled by major capitalists, destroys both the academy and academic freedom. One important consequence of this, is that people wishing to express "politically incorrect" truths (like myself at the recent conference here at Saint Mary's) are blocked from expressing themselves in academic fora. This is just as objectionable in the arts as it would be in science. Imagine, for example, an astronomy conference whose organizers decided to exercise their power to allow only astrologers to participate. In this context, the astronomers are being silenced for some kind of political reasons, and the persons responsible, although they may be regarded as academics, have assumed a role which is political rather than academic. Doing so would undermine astronomy and the academic freedom of astronomers, and all the more so if every conference and journal is organized by the same kind of people, who are using their power as organizers – not their academic freedom- to destroy the academy and academic freedom. The freedom of the astronomer to talk to his friends about astronomy is not a significant instance of academic freedom. Further, it is unfair and unrealistic to expect that the astronomer organize his or her own conference, or even to create his or her own journal in which to publish their work, or to say that because they have the option to do such things, their academic freedom was not infringed upon by the organization of the astronomy conference allowing only astrologers to present. To take such a position, would only reveal a lack of comprehension of what academic freedom is. This example illustrates the problem with conflating absolute freedom of expression with academic freedom. An academic environment, to be considered as such, must have the standard of being academic, which is beyond the scope of an ordinary free speech zone.