

Freedom of Speech and Liberal Education

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The idea that freedom of speech is a fundamental human right has held sway in the West since the ratification of the First Amendment of the American Constitution. In its crudest form, freedom of speech is seen as the right to voice one's grievances without fear of governmental censure or retaliation. The 1969 landmark case, *Tinker v. Des Moines*, established a precedent concerning the integral role of free speech in education. The Supreme Court there ruled in favor of students' rights to free expression.¹ However, as societal and cultural values have shifted over the decades, ideas about free speech and its role in education have shifted as well. As a result, our appreciation of free speech's role in a liberal education has gradually depreciated, as is illustrated in some colleges' and universities' increased efforts to create "safe spaces" that rule out perceived uncomfortable discussions. While many people today may support the principle of free speech in the abstract, they may also balk at the principle when it is applied to particular, difficult cases. In other words, our contemporary ideas about the relationship between freedom of speech and education are often muddled.

At its best, liberal education requires free speech. Freedom of speech is vital to liberal education and its aim of cultivating thoughtfulness about enduring questions about the world and ourselves. Too often, being liberally educated is simply identified with being a "well-rounded" individual. Questions and arguments found in core texts written by thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Locke in this view are likely to be reduced to conceptualized "ideas" that can be identified and dutifully passed on from one generation of students to the next. Yet this view fails to see the depths and challenges of a liberal education. Liberal education is concerned with re-creating the conversations and debates of great authors, not simply in students processing information. As Leon Kass puts it, "Liberal education is education on and for thoughtfulness. It awakens, encourages, and renders habitual, thoughtful reflection about weighty concerns, in quest of what is simply true and good."² Through liberal education, a person comes to know what is true by reasoning and by engaging great texts and the fundamental questions they raise. Freedom of speech manifests the thoughtfulness that is cultivated by liberal education.

The pursuit of thoughtfulness is not easy. It begins with recognizing one's own ignorance and requires questioning our engrained prejudices and opinions. It also requires recognizing that not all opinions are equal. Some opinions turn out to be true, some false, but not all opinions express the truth. Examining differing opinions sparks conflict. Today, colleges and universities are tempted to try to limit the speech of professors and students to avoid the kind of tensions that arise during debates about the truth of differing popular and personal opinions. Allen C. Guelzo, a Professor of the Civil War Era at Gettysburg College, notes a recent incident of this in his article "Free Speech and Its Present Crisis". Guelzo points out that "Professor Leonard Rosen's (Princeton University)

¹ *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).

² Leon Kass, "The Aims of Liberal Education" in *Leading a Worthy Life: Finding Meaning in Modern Times Chicago* (New York: Encounter Books, 2017) 87.

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use of the N-word in his Anthropology of Law class as an instruction-example of offensive speech triggered a dramatic student walkout.”³

Restricting speech within the context of the classroom creates barriers to genuine thought and discussion. Liberal education challenges people to voice their opinions clearly and coherently. It requires the intellectual willingness to consider the possible truth of other people’s opinions. It demands that we distinguish between opinion and knowledge, which is the foundation of liberal education. To quote Kass again, “The power of speech, which enables the intelligibility of thoughts that arise in one mind to fly, as it were, carried on winged words- attached to sounds themselves meaningless—to awaken corresponding intelligibility in another.”⁴ The ability to separate opinion from knowledge is essential to uncovering the truth.

Questioning also serves as an impetus to thoughtfulness. As Kass states, we need to distinguish questioning from problem solving: “A problem is any challenging obstacle, from a fence thrown up before an armed camp to a task set before someone to be done... When a problem is solved, it disappears as a problem. Its solution is its dissolution,”⁵ while, “a true question is a state of mind in which I want to know what I do not know.”⁶ Problem solving assumes that there is a solution to every problem. Problems are resolved as a means to an end; questions seek understanding for its own sake. We can cling to problem solving as a way to avoid the frustration caused by trying to move from knowing something to understanding it. It is easier to believe that there are no real answers to difficult questions about human nature or human life than it is to question whether some of our opinions about these things are true or false. Questioning requires the genuine exchange of ideas. Liberal education opens someone up to what is true and good beyond the isolating beliefs of his individual mind. “This quest for what is good... requires listening to, respecting, and taking seriously the opinions and ways of others, precisely because all opinions seriously held and defended probably embody a certain intimation of what is true, and, at the very least, attest to the human concern with what is true and good, a universal concern more significant than the disparity among the opinions held on these matters.”⁷

Liberal education understands that the freedom to question one’s own and others’ beliefs is important, since this freedom promotes liberal education’s aim to “search for *what we are* and *what we can and should become*.”⁸ Liberal education challenges us to think about both what it means to live and what it means to live well. It cultivates our natural ability of self-consciousness. It is important therefore not to place undue restrictions on speech and the critical examination of popular opinions.

George Orwell remarked that while “thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”⁹ Orwell’s point shows that our ability to argue about the truth of our opinions is undermined when we preface each thought with phrases like “I feel like.” Reducing thoughts to feelings prevents genuine conversations. It also depreciates the reasonableness of some of our

³ Allen Guelzo, “Free Speech and Its Present Crisis”, *City Journal* (Autumn, 2018) 7. <https://www.city-journal.org/free-speech-crisis>

⁴ Kass, “The Aims of Liberal Education.” 96.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, April 1947.

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deepest human emotions and desires and does a disservice to the human mind.¹⁰ Taking freedom of speech seriously calls for understanding the essential relationship of genuine thoughtfulness to the human good. A truly liberal education, one that includes the study of core texts and enduring questions, requires freedom of speech and promotes our ability to “argue rationally, feel deeply and take full responsibility for our interaction in the world.”¹¹ Perhaps colleges and universities today should focus less on limiting the scope of free speech and more on cultivating the type of thoughtfulness and questioning that grounds reasoned speech and shapes its content.

¹⁰ See Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt’s *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018).

¹¹ Molly Worthen, “Stop Saying, ‘I Feel Like’”, *The New York Times*, April 30, 2016.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/opinion/sunday/stop-saying-i-feel-like.html>