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Free Speech: Why the Philosophy Matters

Artykuł jest osobistym spojrzeniem na kulturowe, a zwłaszcza filozoficzne zmagania obrońców wolności słowa i jej wrogów. Przyznając, że wolność słowa była i jest zagrożona zarówno przez prawicowe, jak i lewicowe autorytaryzmy, autor stwierdza, że współczesne zagrożenia pochodzą głównie ze strony postmodernistycznej skrajnej lewicy. Przywołując wielkie postaci obrońców wolności słowa, Galileusza, F. Bacona, J. Locke'a i J. S. Milla, przypomina o znaczeniu tej wolności dla rozwoju wiedzy i postępu społecznego. Pokazuje, że wolność słowa jest nierozdzielnie związana z wolnością myśli i wolnością działania. Powracając do losów wybranych przedstawicieli starożytnej filozofii greckiej, sugeruje, że tam, gdzie kończy się wolność słowa, zaczyna się upadek kultury i społecznej żywotności.

Słowa kluczowe: wolność słowa, skrajna prawica, skrajna lewica, kultura liberalna, kultura unieważniania

Let us start by thinking about what a meaningful life requires. We human beings are smart beings – or potentially smart. We are not instinctual creatures or passive creatures. For us to make a go of our lives, it requires a lot of active engagement with the world and really deep thinking. We have to formulate our life goals and a strategy for realizing them. All of that requires lots of information and lots of experimenting. And it is a do-it-yourself project.

If we extend that to meaningful relationships and social values, we learn that for our relationships to be meaningful, we have to find and discover that we have shared values. There are degrees of intimacy – from business acquaintances, friends, lovers, life partners, and so on. But common to all of those relationships is

that their value and meaningfulness depends on exchanges of information, genuine communication. All of that has to occur within a context of trust that has to be created, a context of respect that also has to be earned, and above all freedom: we have to be able to enter into relationships by our choice and exit those relationships when they are not working out. Even when they are working, disagreements will arise, so we have to have a context in which there is at least an initial benefit of the doubt and each party know they are going to give and get that. That context includes a willingness to hear out the other side, to make nuanced judgment that, before we condemn someone or blame or excuse them, will take all of the available information into account.

All of that is about the cognitive demands upon us as humans beings. We are smart. And if we are going to think deeply about our lives and our important values, then we have to recognize that it's a complicated process – and that is a major part of what education should instill in us.

That is precisely why we now have deep concerns over current educational and broadly intellectual-cultural trends where the opposite conditions seem to be on the rise: An increase in the amount of distrust, disrespect, and in some cases explicit attacks on freedom¹.

The standard, old-fashioned threats are still there worldwide. There are plenty of traditional authoritarian forces; often they're on the so-called conservative side or the so-called right end of some spectrum. And plenty of those people are willing to intimidate, suppress, and override free speech.

¹ The rise of new forms of intolerance, sometimes labeled “Cancel Culture”, has challenged more traditional norms of liberal education, as contrasted in this table:

	<i>Liberal Culture</i>	<i>Cancel Culture</i>
<i>Range of opinion?</i>	Expect diversity of	Expect uniformity of
<i>Attitude toward those who disagree?</i>	Tolerance of the eccentric	Hostility to the deviant
<i>Atmosphere encouraged?</i>	Benevolence	Fear
<i>Methods allowed?</i>	Argument and rhetoric only	Use any tactic, e.g., <i>ad hominem</i> , shouting down, threats, doxing, etc.
<i>Final judgment?</i>	Individual independence encouraged	Conformity demanded
<i>Media?</i>	Some choose generic platform and some choose publisher functions	Secretly and/or double-standard-selectively de-platform
<i>Government's role?</i>	Protects free speech	Censors
<i>Formal education?</i>	Liberal education ideal	Authoritarian
<i>Underlying philosophy?</i>	Reason, objectivity, individualism, social win/win	Irrationalism, subjectivity, collectivism, social adversarialism

But we have a new generational threat that this time is coming especially from the authoritarian left. And there is a question about why that is.

Talking about the authoritarian Left and the authoritarian Right, I want to emphasize that almost always on important issues (applied and philosophical) there are three positions that need to be taken into account, not two. We always have to be wary of binaries. There are important political, religious, and philosophical binaries, but there is only a small number of them. And the false alternatives that we are typically presented with outnumber them by a big margin and come in many forms.

Depending on where you are in the world right now, the worst threats might be coming from right-wing, conservative, authoritarian ideologies. Or if you are in a different part of the world or in a different institutional context, they might be coming from left-wing authoritarians. And it is often worth pointing out – however right and left authoritarians might seem opposed to each other – they often share some more basic common premises that put both of them in opposition to genuine liberals. Those of us who are genuine liberals are often irritated that we are forced to choose between some sort of right-wing “ism” or some sort of left-wing “ism”.

If we look at the debates over speech, we can see a pattern. Because the false alternatives come at us in many philosophical forms. We can look at the philosophical groundings for authoritarians of the right and the left. Typically conservatives, if they are strong religious conservatives, will say we need *metaphysically* to appeal to some higher truths, perhaps to some divine revelations. And some people and some institutions have special access to those higher truths, and that gives them the right to impose their “truths” on the rest of us. *Metaphysically* people at the far-left end of the authoritarian spectrum will say, “No. We don’t believe in any of that nonsense. What we call «reality» is merely this subjectively/socially created context of belief”. But you will find them also arguing that some individuals are especially “woke”. Or that they have been trained in critical theory, and, as a result, they have special insight into what is really going on – and that “wokeness” and special training give them the right to impose their beliefs authoritarily on the rest of us. So even though it seems that the far-left and the far-right have different and opposed metaphysics, both of those metaphysics are used against those who favor liberal approaches to speech and communication.

The argument might be over *human nature*. Again: the far-right and the far-left have different accounts here. Some very strong religious accounts assert the collective sin, collective responsibility, forcing a notion of collective salvation: We all need to unite together and face our Creator or the Ultimate Judge of the universe. That means that deviants, or individuals who disbelieve or challenge, are undermining the salvation of the group. So they need to be dealt with. Yet if we go to the other end of the spectrum, the far-left one, there we will see often non-religious notions of salvation. But nonetheless, they share the idea of collective identity and argue that what human beings need is solidarity with their groups. So if you are

a dissenter and you challenge the dominant beliefs of some collective identity, you will be labeled a “race-traitor” or, in the case of gender and sex issues (i.e., if you are a woman who deviates from some forms of feminist lines), you are betraying “false consciousness” and sabotaging the cause of women everywhere. So again, there is a collectivism that underlies the willingness to impose on individuals who deviate – just on this theme of what it is to be a human being, even though far-right and far-left seem to have different understandings of what that is.

Or if we look more specifically at *ethical* issues: Where do we get our moral values from and what status do those have? We will often, if we go to the far-right conservative end of the spectrum, say there are certain moral values that are just beyond question. There are absolute religious truths that we should just accept. And therefore, it is unconscionable *blasphemy* to challenge any of those beliefs. And we know how we should deal with blasphemers. But then if we go to the far-authoritarian left, they also will say there are certain moral values that are absolutely beyond question. We will put them under the label of “social justice”, which functions as an axiomatic set of beliefs. And it is just unconscionable “*hate speech*” for anyone to challenge those in any fundamental way.

The point is that the far-left and the far-right, if we use those labels, will disagree about metaphysics, human nature, and ethics. Nonetheless, when the rubber meets the road, both positions deny the individual’s needs and responsibility to evaluate the facts of the world and decide what values he/she is going to adopt as an individual using his/her own judgment.

I am reminded of the poet Walt Whitman, who was a genuine liberal, and his advice: “Re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul”². “Your own soul” – that is your own individual judgment. Notice that Whitman is saying you are not necessarily going to *reject*. The idea is that we can learn from people on the left, people on the right, or whoever the current authorities are in our generation. But the important point is that each of us, as individuals, needs to *re-examine* and see it for ourselves, with our own eyes.

Liberalism in the Whitman spirit has often been challenged by the authoritarian right, but now in Western academic and intellectual life the challenge is coming more from the authoritarian left. That raises the question: Why?

Why the authoritarian left?

Let me give a cheap answer: The left, especially the far-left, lost many debates during the 20th century. The left bills itself as being primarily concerned with poverty, racism, sexism – broadly equality issues. And they have a particular understanding of what causes poverty, racism, sexism, and a particular set of recommendations

² W. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass. Preface*: <http://faculty.wiu.edu/M-Cole/WaltWhitmanLeavesof-Grass1855.pdf>.

of how we are supposed to solve those problems. So we have big debates in economic theory and practice, about political interventions, and all of us are aware of the huge controversies over affirmative action as a potential tool for overcoming racism, sexism, and so on.

But the fact is that in the 20th century and on into the 21st century, starting even earlier – in the Age of Enlightenment, we have made astoundingly great progress in combating poverty, sexism, and racism. But that progress has *not* been made because we adopted any of the communistic, socialistic, or far-left proposed solutions or because we implemented affirmative action programs. Instead, the credit for the achievements that we have made in combating poverty and all of those negative “isms” goes to genuinely liberal and free-market capitalist philosophies. Progress has come from emphasizing entrepreneurial achievement, respect for individual merit, and individual freedom. It is precisely to the extent these views have been adopted that we have solved many the old-fashioned problems.

So the credit does not go to the far-left ideologies: Communism and socialism have been failures everywhere they have been tried, and affirmative action has been pretty widely rejected, even though we give it a respectful hearing. But one thing that we know about the ideologists’ psychology is: when one loses a debate, it is tempting to change the terms that underlie that debate. If you’re losing at chess, for example, in your frustration you knock over the board and or you claim that the rules of chess are biased or unfair.

That might be a cheap answer, but it does capture part of the explanation – that the far left knows that it lost a lot of debates, but nonetheless, it is not rejecting its own ideology or engaging in serious self-examination. Instead, it doubles down on a losing ideology and simply adopts more ruthless tactics.

I think that is an explanation of lesser importance because over the last two generations the authoritarian left has won another debate – a *philosophical* debate over the nature of knowledge, truth, language, and power. That takes us into a serious philosophical territory. The claim I am going to make is that *the left has lost some debates, very significant ones, in politics, economics – social philosophy more broadly speaking. But it does have some powerful philosophical tools on its side and those need consideration.*

How did we get where we are now?

Our modern liberal education context came out of debates in the early modern world. Part of the authoritarian left, or the authoritarian-leaning left, is currently reacting to liberal education context. Which is itself a reaction to an early conservative or far-right authoritarian context. The highlights are embodied in all of the famous names we associate with free thinking. These are the deep thinkers – in many cases courageous individuals who carved out the philosophical and intel-

lectual space within which what we call the modern liberal education ideal came into existence.

So we harken back to someone like Galileo Galilei, who was maturely working in science and philosophy of science in the early 1600s. And what's important to remember in Galileo's context is that when he was a younger intellectual, Giordano Bruno had been found guilty of heresy and killed. Bruno was killed – legally by the Inquisition and with the authority of Catholic Church behind it – for advocating what were claimed to be heretical scientific theories. Galileo was cautioned by this, as were thousands of other intellectuals around the world. Given that the Church is a political force (this is prior to the separation of church and state), as well as being a social force, a moral force, and an institutionalized religious force, so one had to be careful.

But what makes Galileo important was his willingness to stand up and say: If we are genuinely interested in the truth, the important fact is that individuals need to use their own reason; they cannot simply consult old books that have been handed down through tradition and agree that certain authoritative institutions have a monopoly on interpretation. Galileo argues as a good Catholic that Scripture is authoritative as long as it stays in its proper zone. And that the clergy and the theologians who are being trained in the authoritative institutions do have an expertise that needs to be respected and so forth³.

But Galileo's argument is that God gave each individual human being sense organs, the capacity to perceive the world, and the capacity to think about the world. And that what God wants us to do is to use our minds to understand – not only the Book of Scripture – but also the Book of Nature. God wrote two Books, and those Books have different rhetorical purposes and sometimes significantly different audiences in mind. So we must understand that God wants us to study the natural world using our God-given intellectual talents. But people who are using their minds to do the experiments, to observe the natural world, and to reason on the basis of it are *not* being anti-religious in doing so. And it is, in fact, a form of heresy or blasphemy if we start to use authoritative, institutional *intimidation* methods to try to make people unthinkingly accept a certain interpretation of how the world works.

We know that Galileo over the course of a couple of decades was in a very awkward position, but he had the courage to argue against what was then the most powerful institution in the Western world. And while eventually he was silenced, nonetheless the arguments that he made prevailed and provided intellectual ammunition for a generations of intellectual freethinkers and scientists to go on and continue the work Galileo was doing in his time. Galileo's key insight is that the in-

³ G. Galilei, *Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany*: <https://web.stanford.edu/~jsabol/certainty/readings/Galileo-LetterDuchessChristina.pdf>.

dividual, each of us, has the capacity to observe the world and think for ourselves. And this is fundamentally a responsibility that we all bear.

A contemporary of Galileo's is the English thinker Francis Bacon. Bacon agrees broadly with the spirit of Galileo's empirical and rational philosophy. The importance of Bacon, in this context, is that reason is not *only* a capacity of studying the world – it is a capacity that first must be trained. To be properly educated, each one of us needs to take on the responsibility of training our own minds. We always are, given the ways our minds work psychologically, tempted to engage in shortcuts. We are, for example, sometimes willing to take our own narrow experience and generalize inappropriately from it. Or we are interested in taking shortcuts in a form of letting our peer-groups or the weight of authority say: "Well, lots of people seem to think this, or various authoritative institutions seem to think this, so I will accept it". And that is a shortcut as well. All of us are always going to be fighting against what Bacon calls these "idols" that are built into our psychological framework⁴. Yet each of us – in our proper self-education, in training our minds to be the effective tools that they can be – needs to take on this internal battle of crafting our rational capacity with the ability to discover truths.

Combining Galileo with Bacon gives us the idea that experience and reason are important and able to understand the world – but experience and reason, as psychological capacities themselves, need vigilantly to be trained. Further: we always need to be on guard against creeping bias in our own thinking, if as individuals we are going to achieve a high level of rational capacity and truth.

In the next generation, John Locke extends this to social issues. If we to take the quest for truth seriously *and* we recognize that each individual has the capacity and the responsibility for seeking the truth and goodness in the world, then necessarily socially this is going to require that we are *tolerant*. Because the world is complicated, we know that if we leave it up to the individuals to go off and explore the world intellectually on their own, they will come up with many different hypotheses. They will make commitments to all sorts of different beliefs. And if the important points are *individual* responsibility and *individual* judgment of truth, then socially we each have to respect the fact that the other individuals have the right to differ in their beliefs. We do not have to respect the belief, but we have to respect their right to have that belief and to follow their own path. That means, institutionally and socially, that we should have deep respect for intellectual diversity. We need to institutionalize it both in ourselves and in the institutions we create⁵.

John Stuart Mill, jumping a century and a half or so, another great liberal thinker, extends this argument further. Mill's unique contribution is to say: Locke

⁴ F. Bacon, *Novum Organum*, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/bacon-novum-organum>.

⁵ J. Locke, *A Letter concerning Toleration*: <https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/goldie-a-letter-concerning-toleration-and-other-writings>

is right, Bacon is right, and Galileo is right. But socially, when seeing others as intellectual rivals when they disagree with us, I should not merely tolerate them but actively seek out their different views. My seeking out their different views benefits me. I might be a smart individual and have thought a lot about various things. But chances are good that I have not thought of everything, and I might not have the best arguments for my beliefs, even if they are true. Consequently, the only way I can discover this is by putting my beliefs to the test. That means giving the other side (or sides) of the debate a fair hearing. In doing so, I might find that they have some part of the truth packaged into their belief system. Maybe I will not accept their belief system overall but find some elements of truth. And that will highlight to me the things I have overlooked and therefore need to incorporate into my own belief system. Of course, their criticism of my current belief system will highlight any weaknesses that it currently has. But as a truth-seeker, that is good for me as it can only strengthen me. So, in addition to tolerating widespread belief, I should actively seek out a diversity of opinions and actively test my beliefs against them. And that is a socially win-win process⁶.

Now that model – integrating Galileo’s point about the importance of reason and experiment, Bacon’s point about the importance of each of us taking on our own psychological biases and temptations to take shortcuts, Locke’s emphasis on diversity and social tolerance, and Mill’s seeing the clash of ideas as a socially win-win process that we should all embrace – came to form the modern liberal education context. That is to say, liberal education is about the pursuit of truth, but it is about the rational pursuit of truth. The rational pursuit of truth is a responsibility that each individual bears. And the only way the individual can develop self-respect and proper social dignity is by engaging in this process to the best of his/her ability. Social respect and social benevolence should be built into the process in order to make it work not only for each of us as individuals but for our societies more broadly.

This liberal-education model prevailed over the course of many generations and, in some cases, many centuries of battles – tooth-and-nail battles against traditional conservative forces (and I mean literally tooth and nail, as many early liberal thinkers did have their teeth and nails yanked out under torture) – and became our modern liberal education ethos.

Free Speech *Is* Free Thought *Is* Free Action

Embodied in that conception of liberal education is a philosophical view about the nature of language: Language is a tool of cognition and communication. Yet that point about what language is and how it works and what makes it valuable is itself subject to philosophical controversy.

⁶ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/34901/34901-h/34901-h.htm>.

The italics in the heading – Free Speech *Is* Free Thought *Is* Free Action – are to emphasize the integrations between speech, thought, and action. That is a rhetorical overstatement, but I do so to highlight the importance of the integration of thought with speech with actions. That is a philosophically charged set of claims. When we debate free speech debates, when we talk about cognition and communication, it is important that we see that language (that is, the vehicle that we use for cognition and communication) as primarily *individual* in nature. That is one point to stress. A second point is that language requires a kind of *integration between abstract theory and particular practice*. Human cognition works by a complex interaction of abstract and particular processes, as well as of theoretical and applied processes. This takes us into some deep but crucially important territory, for when we get to far-left and especially postmodern-left attacks on free speech that is where the real battleground is.

First, let us focus on the individuality. Typically and for very good reasons, defenders of free speech emphasize the social aspects. John Locke and his followers emphasize that free speech is important in part because trying to suppress speech is almost completely useless. When speech is suppressed, the censorship does not really change anybody's mind. People just secretly go on believing whatever that is they are going to believe. They might mouth the appropriate words if the authorities force them to do so, but that does not change anyone's actual belief. So political authoritarianism is intellectually useless.

John Stuart Mill's complementary emphasis is upon our social needs of learning – that we really need to understand and hear from the intellectual opposition. Otherwise, even if we believe true things, we will only have a second-best or third-rate understanding of why those things are true.

Free speech is an important social need and one that should have, in my judgment, absolute political protection. But the most important truth is that free speech is a need of *individual* minds. And the reason for that is: *thinking requires integration*. We have to think, we have to externalize our thinking in speech, we have to externalize our thinking and speech in action by trying things out in the world, and we have to take the results of our trying things out in the world as data that feeds back into our thinking. There is no way – if we are genuinely interested in human cognition – to isolate thinking or speech as a only a secret thing that goes on in the privacy of your own minds with no connection to the world. Free thinking requires free speech, and both require free action. That is a robust set of rights that should be respected and implemented.

If we take language, for example – again emphasizing its individuality – there is a common thesis that language is a social product. The argument is true in one sense: language is importantly social. Yet it is *not* primarily social. It is true that language exists before any one of us is born, so we are born into a language culture. It is also true that we are all taught language in a social context, usually first from our parents. Despite those two facts, language is primarily an individual function.

Here I make an analogy to riding a bicycle. It is true that bikes were made by other people long before any of us is born. It is also true that when you learn to ride a bike, it is almost always because you are taught to use it by others. Maybe you see other people riding a bike, and they inspire you to try. Maybe it is more hands-on with your mother or father or older sibling who models riding for you and encourages you. But the important thing about bike-riding is that it is something you *do yourself*. And it is *for yourself*. Bike-riding happens when you, as an individual, make a commitment to it. You must decide to let go of any supports. You have to push off from the ground by yourself. You have to press the pedals. You have to steer the bike yourself. You have to go in the direction that you have chosen. The same holds with language, and that is the argument: Like a bicycle, language is a tool that we use as individuals, primarily. We have to initiate the process. We have to use the language to guide our thinking, we must take it in the direction we want to go. We have to push and steer the language in the direction we have chosen. So that is the individuality of the process: language is primarily something that individuals use as a tool to understand the world for themselves.

Even in social uses of language, when engaging in communication acts with others an individual has to initiate the language and those receiving the language have to initiate the process of listening or reading and interpreting the language signs and processing them in their individual minds. Even the social elements of language require the individual functioning of the minds involved.

Secondly, a point about integration. Free speech is based on needs of cognition, and cognition happens well only where the free speech is the operative social principle. Each of us has the happy responsibility of developing our minds, keeping them fit, keeping our minds healthy, just as we have the responsibility of keeping our bodies fit and healthy. But the ways our minds work – and, as far as we know, much of this is distinctive to human cognition – is by a complicated interplay of particular elements and the abstractions that we form by a process of concept-formation. We have very powerful minds that enable us to put things into abstract categories. But when we get very abstract and don't connect our abstractions back to the particulars it is easy to get lost in thought or for our thinking to become overly rationalistic and lose actual connection to concrete, particular reality. So what thinking requires, especially abstract thinking, is a connecting to particulars – particular entities in the world, the particular concretes that give rise to concepts and gives them meaning.

The second and closely related point is that when we are thinking – we do have a powerful mind—but there is so much one can hold in one's mind at any given time. Sometimes this is given the nickname “crow-epistemology”, because when crows' minds were studied they were found to have a limited number of particular units that the crows could attend to at a given point. The same is true of human beings. If we just attend to particular objects or particular mental entities that we are con-

sidering, we can only hold so many of them in mind at that time – perhaps five, six, or seven if we are concentrating very hard. But reality is complicated and often-times we need to keep track of more than five, six, or seven things. So we need memory tools to enable us, in connection with the things we are actively considering, to have the other objects that we need to attend to within cognitive grasp easily enough – some sort of memory aid.

The third thing is that much of our thinking requires that we integrate what we are considering currently with our background knowledge. Each of us has thousands of items of background information that we want to recall and have available to us to consult when in our current thinking. That means that we also need long-term memory aids: books, for example, or hard drives where we have stored lots of information that we can call up when we need it.

The fourth thing is that we need is actually to try out our objects of knowledge – hypotheses that we are considering, for example – in the real world. Often the only way we can figure out whether something really is true or reliable is by doing experiments. And experimenting is a form of acting in the world. So cognition requires experimenting; there is no way that we can just retreat to our philosophers' armchairs. (Actually, that gives philosophers a bad reputation, but sometimes it is true as a cliché). By that stereotypical philosopher's-armchair method, we tune out the world and without actually engaging with the world experimentally try to figure out the truth about it – and that is just not possible.

What this means is that if we are interested in thinking – and of course, we are interested in thinking, since thinking is the only way we can get the truth – then the truth is that our thinking requires embodiment. It must be embodied in concrete language, in words, in spoken words, in written words – that is to say, free thought requires the freedom to externalize our thoughts in a particular form: in speech, in text, or by means of signs. If we are not allowed to do that, then our cognitive ability is dramatically impaired.

It also means that our thinking requires freedom of action: we have to be able to go out into the world and try out our ideas to see which ones work. That means we need a lot of trial-and-error. Sometimes the trial-and-error is a matter of debating with other people to put our ideas to a social test. Or experimenting in physical reality – both debate and experiment are kinds of action.

So, claim is that both individually and socially freedom of thought does not exist only as an isolated, abstracted, disconnected thing from speech, from action, from the rest of the world. Rather, freedom of thought necessarily includes, if it is to be effective, freedom of speech, freedom of the press (socially), and the liberty of action.

The point I am stressing is about epistemology and more specifically about language. My individualistic thesis implies is that if we turn to philosophies that are fundamentally not individualistic – or that in some deep way separate the needs of

thought from the needs of speech from the needs of action from the needs of concretization – then we will find philosophies that will also not see the importance of free speech. And that sometimes will actively oppose it.

To say that Free Speech *Is* Free Thought *Is* Free Action is a rhetorical overstatement, but its purpose is to emphasize the integration of thought, speech, and action. Of course, we can think in limited ways without speaking. We can act semi-successfully in the world without engaging in fresh thinking. But fully successful human living is an ongoing process of free action guided by free thinking, wherein that thinking in turn is informed by the results of that action.

The responsibility of teachers, professors, and parents

This leads us directly to the responsibility of teachers and professors and parents concerned with raising their children. Our responsibility when we take on that role is ourselves to be genuine seekers of truth, goodness, and beauty. And, in turn, we are guiding and mentoring others, typically younger people, in their seeking of truth, goodness, and beauty. So what we want is for those others, whom we are teaching, to consider many ideas, to read widely, to feel free and welcome to express their own half-formed opinions, to enter into debates, to question other people's ideas, to be open to having their own ideas criticized, to actively try out their ideas, to do formal experiments. Because we think that is the only way to get to the truth—and especially to complex truths. The individual engages in observation, experimenting, and reasoning in an integrated fashion.

We are all familiar with those who, unfortunately, discourage some or all of those activities. People who are indoctrinators. They have their agendas, they have their beliefs, they have their so-called truths. And when they get positions of superiority or authority, they use that power in totally irresponsible ways: They give biased education, biased presentations. They present only one side of positions on issues that they know are controversial and that there are very good viewpoints on other sides. Or they engage in some sort of intellectual, social, or even political intimidation. In my view, those people are intellectual cowards. At a minimum, they are abusers of their power. Good teachers inform; they model, they coach.

Our newer enemies of free speech are not old-fashioned indoctrinators. They are precisely those who do not believe in the individual. They believe in group identities, and they typically believe that individuals who are in those groups are shaped by group forces beyond the individual's control. They are also those who do not believe in truth or reason—those who put those words in scare quotes – “truth”, “reason” – when they use them. That is to say, they are committed to some sort of deep skepticism. And that is most often the postmodern left in our time, and it is they who are at the root of most contemporary attacks on free speech in intellectual life. They are more demographically represented among those who currently

are willing to use intimidation and/or outright forceful methods to advance their particular group's beliefs and values.

One point of this essay is to highlight the fact that the debate is philosophical. The free-speech debate is not primarily political, it is not primarily economic or about some other social dimension. Just as liberal free speech required a philosophical defense against traditional conservative kinds of authoritarianism in the late Medieval and early modern eras, in contemporary times it requires one against contemporary postmodern leftists.

What happens when free speech suppressed

A historical reminder: We do live in a very successful culture. We have many admirable things to celebrate and to enjoy. Part of the good life is simply being able to take for granted that you are living in a successful culture and get on with the business of enjoying everything that culture makes possible for you. But it is also important to remember that there have been past successful cultures that eventually failed. And frequently they failed precisely on the issue we are now concerned with: widespread respect for the free speech.

Recall the example of Socrates. Socrates was a martyr precisely for philosophical thinking. Yet Socrates was not an isolated example. A generation earlier, the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander was exiled from Athens for daring to suggest that the sun was not a god, but rather just a big rock up in the sky that was on fire. Imagine that. Anaximander was ousted, then a generation later Socrates was killed, and then a generation-and-a-half later – as tensions once again arose in Athens over various politically-charged issues – Aristotle abandoned Athens because, as he put it, he did not want the hot-tempered politicized elements to commit another sin against philosophy. It is not an accident that Greece's golden age was declining precisely in the era of Aristotle. Greece had weakened itself internally, and its weakening was one of the reasons why it was conquered successfully by the Romans.

If we jump to the late feudal era and early modern era, the case of Galileo is of course important. And the large number of other individuals – such as Michael Servetus and Giordano Bruno and William Tyndale – who were martyred and killed by religious authoritarians and other forms of conservative, anti-intellectual authoritarians suppressing free speech.

The silencing of Galileo for the last decade of his life also sent a signal to many other important intellectuals. I am thinking here of René Descartes, another philosophical genius, who early in his life decided to get out of southern Europe, where the repressions were worse, and move to northern Europe where there was a greater degree of intellectual tolerance. It is not a historical accident that Italy – which had been the seat of the Renaissance and had spawned a several generations

of universities' founding and which had attracted the best minds all from all over Europe to its universities – the once the news of Galileo's silencing spread, Italy declined to second-rate status, and eventually to third-rate. And it was precisely England, Netherlands and other places in the north of Europe that had more free speech and liberal environments that became intellectually vigorous.

Add to those the lessons just of the last one hundred years. One can make the argument that Germany was an amazing powerhouse intellectual culture with its 19th-century and early 20th-century philosophy, science, and art. But with the rise of National-Socialism and the rise of Communism there – it is always important to remember that Hegelianism and Marxism were German exports – as those kinds of intellectual and political authoritarianisms rose to social prominence, intellectual lives in the nations thereby affected also slowed down and silenced. As thousands and thousands of very bright freethinkers from all parts of the intellectual spectrum got out of Germany, Austria, Russia and went to the West where by-and-large liberal free speech was respected and practiced.

So the lessons of history are quite clear: The only way we can have a vigorous, progressive culture is by having lots of individuals who are creative and brilliant. And the only way we are going to have a culture in which individuals are free to put together a happy life as they see fit is by giving people lots of scope for thinking for themselves, deciding their own values and doing their own experimenting in an atmosphere of intellectual and social tolerance. That requires an atmosphere of social benevolence wherein we actively embrace the collision of ideas to figure out which ones really are best. Any practice of intimidation, self-exiling, and outright killing obviously ruins the cultures that have achieved some measure of greatness.

We have a great but flawed civilization. But let us make sure, for our own sakes – the sakes of our own individual selves as well for our mutual benefit – that we do not repeat the dramatic mistakes of history. We each have to learn what made us possible or possible for us to create a great civilization in the first place: Good philosophy. We are in a philosophical battle right now, and we need to know it.

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