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AAUP Foundation: Centennial Contest

Concerning the Necessary:  
Academic Freedom

The freedom to express one's opinions in the academic realm is necessary. Academic freedom fosters the necessary environment for a prosperous commonwealth. This seems so obvious in the twenty-first century, that writing about such a topic should be exceptionally banal by now. Sadly, the world still struggles with people, who dogmatic in their beliefs, are unwilling to accept the common mantra: Agree to disagree. How evident this has been to us with the recent malicious shooting at the Charlie Hebdo headquarters, a satirical newspaper in France. After satirizing the Prophet Muhammad, the newspaper company became the subject of a barbaric attack which resulted in a dozen deaths. Charlie Hebdo is not an academic institution. Their publications are intended for the public sphere. Despite this one can only ask, if citizens are gun-downed for expressing their views in public, how much room for freedom is in the academic world?

If students are asked to engage in contemplation, then professors will hopefully raise questions which provoke and fuel thinking. As a philosophy student, I hope my professor's lecture will not be full of pragmatic slurs and empty rhetoric. I want a professor who uses reason and evidence to dislodge my most tacit assumptions of the world. It's a great misfortune when a professor embarks on destroying prejudice, but the personal incredulity of others comes in between truth and ignorance. Public universities have often suspended or even fired professors who have controversial views. Steven Salaita, for example, was voted not to be hired by the

University of Illinois board of trustees after publishing anti-Israel tweets. Does the University of Illinois really think criticizing the ongoing Israeli attacks on Gaza is blasphemous?

We are falling upon an era where the modest of criticisms, absent of any hostility, can be seen as offensive. One of the challenges of academic freedom is knowing where to draw the line between criticism and hate speech. With the academic world home to all types of ethnic groups, academic freedom should never go so far as to protect those who intend to harm others based on how they identify themselves. Ad hominem attacks have no place in the academic world.

However, forbidding speech against the status quo because it may seem offensive, limits inquiry.

In an article written last year, Mae Kuykendall and Debra Nails state very simply the consequences of limiting speech:

If an institution of higher learning allows unpopular speech, or novel gambits by a professor, to result in summary dismissal for giving offense to some part of the learning community, the loss is to the ideal of open discourse, risk-taking, and inquiry. Minds nourished by an atmosphere of free inquiry and robust exchanges thrive and grow. In a barren learning environment, engagement with ideas and the passion for knowledge suffer.<sup>1</sup>

Nails and Kuykendall, taking a utilitarian approach to academic freedom, recognize that it is to the benefit of the common good to ensure an environment of academic freedom. Clearly, free inquiry and the search for truth is halted when unpopular speech becomes grounds for dismissal.

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<sup>1</sup>Kuykendall, Mae and Nails, Debra, Trial by YouTube (December 30, 2013). Brain-Mind Magazine, Vol. 2, No. 2, summer 2013.

The masses are often conditioned by extreme devotion or loyalty to a certain belief, that an egotism amongst the group will arise rendering all adverse opinions unwarranted. To stop credulous and obedient thinking, academia must remain a domain for the free exchange of expressions. Such was the topic of Baruch de Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. After its anonymous publication, the *Treatise* was regarded as blasphemous. One commentator went so far as to claim it was "a book forged in hell" and written by the devil.<sup>2</sup> Spinoza, certainly not the devil, was one of the most remarkable advocates for academic freedom and democratic principles during the seventeenth century. Because of its critical approach to biblical text, it quickly became a banned book. Yet, what was undoubtedly missed by religious authorities commenting on it was Spinoza's main thesis: The freedom to philosophize.

Spinoza knew very well the dangers of organized religion, which dictated the limits of inquiry. For example, during the time Spinoza was writing, Galileo was being prosecuted for defending a heliocentric world view rather than accepting the sanctioned geocentric view. Spinoza's *Theological-Political* project was to intended to ensure independent minds, like Galileo's, had the ability to "[T]hink what he will and to say what he thinks."<sup>3</sup> I like to think Spinoza was an absolutist on the matter of free speech. Of course he did rule out seditious speech, or that which harms the public well being. For example yelling "fire!" in a crowded theater. But for Spinoza, having a free and independent mind was paramount. He recognized the influence culture and religion has in shaping our minds, therefore he was dedicated to eliminating prejudice, which everyone should be responsible for in academia.

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<sup>2</sup> For more on Spinoza's *Treatise* see Steven Nadler's, *A Book Forged in Hell*.

<sup>3</sup> TTP XX, G III.247; S 229.

How will universities look when distinguished professors and the brightest minds of our day start turning down offers to lecture and teach because of the universities' uncertain or weak due-process protections for faculty? Such was the case for Spinoza, who in a letter to a prince had to ask in the most polite manner to retract his offer. His reason for doing so: he was skeptical how much he would be able to philosophize before getting in trouble with the authorities. Thus he writes:

[T]hat I do not know the limits, within which the freedom of my philosophical teaching would be confined, if I am to avoid all appearance of disturbing the publicly established religion....I have experienced these results in my private and secluded station, how much more should I have to fear them after my elevation to this post of honour.<sup>4</sup>

Today, faculty members might worry not so much about religious authorities, but the growing army of administrating staff. Recently, John McAdams, a professor at Marquette University was stripped of his tenure because of a blog post he wrote about a dispute between a graduate student and a student. The blog post criticizes the graduate students approach to handle the student's comment about gay marriage. What McAdams was arguing for in his blog is the possibility for rich and diverse exchanges in the classroom, writing, "How many students, especially in politically correct departments like Philosophy, simply stifle their disagreement, or worse yet get indoctrinated into the views of the instructor, since those are the only ideas allowed, and no alternative views are aired? Like the rest of academia, Marquette is less and less a real

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<sup>4</sup> Spinoza to Fabritius, Letter LIV. (XLVIII.)

university.”<sup>5</sup> As the author of the article, Conor Friedersdorf, rightly notes, “If tenure can be taken away based upon one controversial blog post, what protection does it offer?”

Where do we draw the line? The university is an institution of higher learning. It is not a business, it is not a church. My worry is with the trend to increase administrative size and power. I fear a blindness administrations often go about controlling the academic environment. In a university, the restriction of ad hominem attacks, appeal to emotion, special pleading, tu quoque, or any fallacy have you, goes without saying. Beyond that, the university needs to go back to its roots. An atmosphere which allows for the freedom of inquiry, where our most basic presuppositions are subject to scrutiny. Adding more administrators makes for a good business model, but a fruitless academic environment. Why place limits to what one can say in the academic realm when there is still so much we don't know? I wonder, would Spinoza have taught at my university? I'm hesitant to say the least.

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<sup>5</sup> Friedersdorf, Conor. "Stripping a Professor of Tenure Over a Blog Post." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 09 Feb. 2015. Web.