

FALSE IDEAS SHOULD BE DISCUSSED, CHALLENGED, AND REFUTED

Frances Widdowson

One of the fundamental tenets of modern universities is that professors should have academic freedom. There are disagreements, however, as to where the boundaries of academic freedom lie. Should academics have the freedom to explore all ideas in the manner that they choose, or should universities impose restrictions on what they study and teach, and how they do it?

This question is particularly pertinent with respect to the dissemination of what has been called “pseudoscience”. Many see this as being contrary to the university’s mandate, as it enables false ideas to be given legitimacy. Even worse, it is argued, the acceptance of these ideas could be harmful for society, and so any tolerance of them should be prohibited in universities.

But an idea is not, in itself, harmful; it is acting upon an idea that can cause harm. And speculating about an idea’s truth, or its potential harm, is compromised when academic freedom is restricted. A real evaluation only becomes possible by examining all the arguments in favour or against it, and an expansive conception of academic freedom makes this possible.

This position is one that is rooted in the ideas of the philosopher John Stuart Mill. Although Mill did not specifically talk about academic freedom, he had important things to say about freedom of expression more generally. In his famous essay “On Liberty”, Mill made the following pertinent argument: “The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race...If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error”.

This argument has great relevance for academic freedom, as it points to the importance of protecting the dissemination of all ideas, even those that are believed to be false. One of the key features of scientific knowledge, after all, is that it is imperfect and must be continually rethought, revised and corrected; correction can occur only if the exchange of ideas is uninhibited. Those arguments that we think are true today also can be improved by understanding why contradictory positions are erroneous. Through this self-correcting mechanism we have discovered that the earth revolves around the sun, and now accept that homosexuality is not a mental illness. To illustrate the benefits of a robust conception of academic freedom, David White insightfully makes the following analogy: “Just as in the judicial system we believe it better that ten guilty people go free than one innocent person be convicted, in the pursuit of knowledge it is better that some pernicious ideas be allowed to be defended than to silence some truths we have yet to discover” (“Response to Mercer’s ‘Two Ways,’” SAFS newsletter, January 2015, p. 3).

This expansive conception of academic freedom is particularly important in the social sciences, where there are often attempts to suppress politically controversial positions on the grounds that they do not meet accepted academic standards. This can be seen in two well known cases where academic freedom was violated – the cases of Philippe Rushton and Norman Finkelstein. Phillippe Rushton was a psychologist at the University of Western Ontario who

argued that there was a link between race and intelligence. Rushton's opponents largely would have seen themselves as residing on the left of the political spectrum, as they demanded that he be fired on the grounds that his work justified discrimination against oppressed racial groups. Norman Finkelstein, a political scientist at DePaul University, on the other hand, was mostly opposed by people who were associated with the right wing cause of supporting the state of Israel, as his book, *The Holocaust Industry*, argued that the memory of this historical event was being used to justify the oppression of Palestinians.

While it was politics that motivated the opposition to these academics, many arguments for denying Rushton and Finkelstein academic freedom were justified on the grounds that their work was flawed academically. Anver Saloojee, for example, a past vice-president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, argued that he would have resigned his position if the organization defended Rushton's academic freedom on his watch. Saloojee supported this argument on the basis that "pseudo-scientific racism is unjustifiable in the academy".

Similarly, Finkelstein was opposed academically by professors like Alan Dershowitz, ironically a civil liberties advocate, who wrote to DePaul University faculty members to lobby against Finkelstein's application for tenure. Dershowitz did this, not on political grounds, but because he claimed that Finkelstein was guilty of "egregious academic sins", such as "outright lies, misquotations, and distortions".

But how do we know if Rushton's views were pseudoscientific or that Finkelstein committed "egregious academic sins"? The issues are so politicized that it is difficult to tell. This can be determined only by a disinterested interrogation of the ideas involved, and it is a robust conception of academic freedom that makes this possible.

In order to deal with the problem of professors teaching, undertaking research and making public utterances that are considered to be pseudoscientific, the best approach would be to make sure additional forums are provided so that these views can be discussed, challenged, and refuted. In this way we could understand why the arguments are flawed and the evidence is lacking. We need to do much more work in the academy in discussing what constitutes good biology, good history, good archaeology, and good psychology. In this way, we will be better able to combat erroneous ideas and not be fooled by political ideologues who selectively apply arguments about upholding academic standards to silence their opponents.

Being an academic means that one has to follow the arguments and evidence, wherever they may lead. Unfortunately, universities are a business and are often more concerned with public relations than the pursuit of truth. To fight this tendency, we need to increase discussion of why ideas are incorrect rather than saying that professors should not express them because they are "pseudoscientific".

Frances Widdowson, the Coordinator, Membership Outreach, of SAFS, is an Associate Professor in the Department of Economics, Justice and Policy Studies, at Mount Royal University, in Calgary. She is, with Albert Howard, co-editor of Approaches to Aboriginal Education in Canada: Searching for Solutions (2013) and co-author of Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry: The Deception behind Indigenous Cultural Preservation (2008).

