

## FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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*ABSTRACT: Why is freedom of speech so seldom raised as an issue in philosophy of education? In assessing this question, it is important to distinguish (i) between a freedom and its exercise, and (ii) between different philosophies of education. Western philosophies of education may be broadly divided into classes derived from theories of knowledge first articulated in ancient Greece. Freedom of speech is in principle inimical to some of these, while being essential to the objectives of others.*

*Keywords: freedom, education, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Mill*

### I. INTRODUCTION

I propose to discuss freedom of speech as an issue in philosophy of education. At the outset it is worth noting how rare it is for that issue to be raised by philosophers of education. It is certainly possible to find whole books on the subject that do not once mention free speech. I think there is an explanation for this, which I shall come to shortly.

First, some examples. One twentieth-century case would be D.J. O'Connor's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. This was written in postwar Britain explicitly to serve 'students of education in universities and training colleges' as 'a simple introduction to philosophical thinking' (O'Connor, 1957, p. 1). One reason why O'Connor published it, apart from his obvious assumption that this body of students might otherwise be totally innocent of philosophical thinking, was his concern to safeguard those engaged in educational studies against falling into what he regarded as 'one of the commonest and most dangerous of intellectual errors – that of talking philosophy unawares' (O'Connor, 1957, p. 15).

This warning is worth repeating here. But its repetition should not be interpreted as an endorsement of O'Connor's position. O'Connor

seems to be strangely unaware of a complementary ‘common’ and ‘dangerous’ error: the error committed by philosophers who, as it might be described, ‘talk education unawares’. Nor, as will become evident below, do I share his view of the division between philosophical and educational questions.

Perhaps an even more surprising case of the failure to link freedom of speech explicitly with education is to be found in Bertrand Russell’s polemical tract *On Education*, published thirty years earlier in 1926. The lacuna is all the more remarkable in that the book is a relentless inventory of dos and don’ts for teachers, parents and children, from the first year of life up to university, and all aimed at what Russell calls the creation of ‘free men and women’ (Russell, 1926, p. 206). But the nearest he ever comes to discussing the relation between freedom of speech and education is a passing recommendation to encourage among ‘the older girls and boys’ what Russell calls ‘the habit of intelligent controversy’ (Russell, 1926, p. 186). This sounds very much like no more than a remote nod of approval towards the establishment of school debating societies. *On Education* contains no serious attempt to discuss the wider issue of whether freedom of speech in society at large is not essential for any system of education that Russell would approve.

More recently we find that in D.A. Turner’s *Theory of Education* (Turner, 2004), although the author warns us against accepting causal explanations in education, because they ‘suggest a determinism in human behaviour which is unwarranted and removes both freedom of choice from the participants in a theoretical sense and also removes responsibility for their actions’ (Turner, 2004, p. 10), and although his text is peppered with references to ‘free will’, in the end he prefers to discuss such recondite ‘soft’ topics as game theory, decision theory and chaos theory rather than confront the hard issue of free speech directly.

In the RSA’s recently published and much trumpeted ‘Education Charter’ for the twenty-first century, one searches the pious document in vain for any reference to freedom of speech. What we are told is that ‘we must trust our schools and educational professionals’. This reads suspiciously like trusting ‘them’ to decide how much freedom of expression is good for us.

It all sounds very much like an Establishment conspiracy of silence to keep freedom of speech off the educational agenda. But I think the reason why many educational theorists fail to discuss freedom of speech is not that they take it for granted but that they tacitly adopt what I call below a ‘Platonic’ model of education, which allows freedom of speech to be superseded by other values.

The prevailing view nowadays seems to be that philosophy of education is supposed to address such general questions as ‘What is education for?’. Or ‘How is education best achieved?’. In other words, the philosopher of education inquires into the aims and methods of education. But no one has to be a professional philosopher in order to do that. These are questions that occur to most parents at one time or another. And they might even occur to students going through some process of schooling. At least, one hopes they might.

That is not a popular view at the present time, because education has become one of the sacred cows of politics. You might have thought that when Tony Blair announced that the three aims of a Labour government would be ‘Education, education and education’, it might have occurred to even the most dimwitted of politicians to say: ‘Hang on a minute! What do you mean by ‘education?’’. But did they? From every corner of the political arena they all joined in the chorus like a cage of parrots. ‘Education, education, education. We want more of it.’ As if it were patently obvious to man, woman and bird what education was.

The trouble with focusing discussion on the aims and methods of education is that it risks taking for granted an answer to the more fundamental question; namely, the question of what it is that arguments concerning aims and methods are about. One might have hoped that philosophers, of all specialists, would be acutely aware of this. But in practice they seem just as prone as politicians to taking ‘education’ to be an unproblematic notion. That is far from being the case, as I shall argue at greater length below. But before coming back to that it is worth trying to sort out some common confusions about the other key topic under discussion, ‘freedom of speech’.

## 2. FREEDOMS AND EXERCISE OF FREEDOMS

The most pervasive of these confusions is that between freedom of speech and its exercise or implementation. There are clearly people who cannot see the difference. It is a confusion that runs throughout Simon Lee’s utilitarian approach in *The Cost of Free Speech*, written in the aftermath of the Salman Rushdie affair. Failure to draw that important distinction is one of the main reasons for its being such an unconvincing book. Lee constantly talks of ‘freedom of speech’ when what he is actually discussing are instances of the exercise of, or failure to exercise, that freedom.

There is nothing arcane about this distinction, nor is it peculiar to freedom of speech. It applies to all freedoms. Freedom is one thing:

its exercise is another. I am perfectly free to go to London if I want to. Whether I am in a position to exercise that freedom is quite a different matter. If I live in Siberia I may never be able to. But the fact that I may never manage – for lack of funds or other claims on my attention or poor health – to see London is no reason for saying that my freedom to go there is being denied. Nor is my own lack of interest in making the trip a reason for claiming that I have no such freedom. I am still free to do it, even if I have no interest whatever in pursuing that objective. Similarly, if I leave home late and miss the bus, that is no reason for saying my freedom to take my preferred means of transport was denied – either by me or by anyone else, including the bus driver who unwittingly failed to wait for me.

We may all agree that there is no point in having a freedom that can *never* be exercised; but that is not the issue. The issue is that it makes nonsense of freedom to make its existence depend on the permanent availability of conditions for its unhindered exercise.

On the other hand, there is no point trying to convince myself that I am still free to go to London if the reason why I cannot go there is that I am in jail serving a lengthy prison sentence on Dartmoor. The reason why I am in jail, presumably, is that the judge found that an appropriate punishment for what I had done was deliberately to deprive me of many of the freedoms I had formerly enjoyed as a law-abiding citizen. It would be twisted thinking for me to reason that a prison sentence had not really deprived me of any freedoms, but only of the opportunity of exercising those freedoms. Or that I had not lost any freedom because I was perfectly content with life in my prison cell.

It is worth recalling in this connexion the words of wisdom in Locke's famous chapter 'Of Power': 'If the ideas of liberty and volition were well fixed in our understandings, and carried along with us in our minds, as they ought, through all the questions that are raised about them, I suppose a great part of the difficulties that perplex men's thoughts, and entangle their understandings, would be much easier resolved; and we should perceive where the confused signification of terms, or where the nature of the thing caused the obscurity' (Locke, 1706, II.xxi.26). Nowhere is this more true than in discussions of education.

### 3. SPEECH

The other main source of confusion in the case of freedom of speech concerns what counts as 'speech'. I shall not here go into such questions as whether burning a national flag, or making a grimace

or a vulgar gesture at someone, or deliberating uprooting plants in protest against experimental trials of GM crops, count as acts of 'speech'. My argument in this paper does not depend on resolving questions of that kind. The uncontroversial examples of 'speech' I shall take to be the verbal expression of explicit questions or statements, either spoken or written, concerning a given subject. Treating what is said as *including* what is merely implied or suggested but not overtly expressed seems to me to open another door to confusion and endless controversy. Much of the hullabaloo about freedom of speech focuses not on what someone actually said but on someone else's gratuitous interpretation of what saying it implied. Freedom of speech presupposes no correlative freedom of interpretation. If it did, freedom of speech would be a vacuous freedom.

#### 4. FREE SPEECH AND EDUCATION

Given all this, how does it apply to education? It may be helpful to begin by examining a specific example: Samuel Johnson's contention that doubts about the existence of God should not be raised in the presence of children. Boswell reports the following conversation.

'Would you restrain private conversation, Sir?'

JOHNSON. 'Why, Sir, it is difficult to say where private conversation begins, and where it ends. If we three should discuss even the great question concerning the existence of a Supreme Being by ourselves, we should not be restrained; for that would be to put an end to all improvement. But if we should discuss it in the presence of ten boarding-school girls, and as many boys, I think the magistrate would do well to put us in the stocks, to finish the debate there.' (Boswell, 1791, p. 1088)

It is fairly clear that Johnson does not hold that debating the existence of God should be banned: if he did, he would indeed be upholding a denial of free speech. What he maintains is that it should not be debated in front of schoolchildren. One may disagree with him about that, but that is a disagreement about the exercise of freedom of speech, not about the freedom itself.

The restriction that Johnson evidently approves falls into a large category of cases which it will be impossible here to list exhaustively or even to describe in detail, but which may be called collectively, for want of a better term, 'circumstantial' restrictions. The general form of a circumstantial restriction on the exercise of free speech is the following: 'Topic T may be freely discussed, or Opinion O freely

expressed, but not in circumstances  $C_1 \dots C_n$ . Johnson's particular example is unfortunate in one respect: it perhaps gives the impression that a circumstantial restriction has something to do with the particular topic or opinion in question. But this is not necessarily the case. Although we may not believe that Johnson and his friends would have deserved punishment in the stocks for holding their debate about a Supreme Being in front of schoolchildren, there is no inconsistency in hoping that if they had held it at the top of their voices in the front row at Drury Lane during a performance of *Hamlet*, to the annoyance of the actors and other members of the audience, the theatre stewards would have had no hesitation in ejecting them. In such a case, *what* Johnson and his associates were arguing about would have been an irrelevance. To complain that the stewards who ejected them were infringing Johnson's and his friends' freedom of speech would be absurd, and the source of the absurdity would be, precisely, a failure to distinguish between freedom and its exercise.

In the case of any given freedom there will always be room for unending disagreement over particular circumstantial restrictions. But the point being made here is that these will be disagreements about the exercise of that freedom, not about the freedom itself. Confusion reigns as soon as we conflate the two.

There are those who argue that whenever the exercise of free speech may be subject to restrictions, and hence justifiably prevented, that constitutes *eo ipso* an admission that speech is not free after all (even though we may like to pretend that it is). Thus to speak of restricted free speech turns out to be itself a contradiction in terms. For others this line of argument is entirely unpersuasive, since they regard it as tantamount to claiming that freedoms must be absolute, or they are not genuine freedoms at all – which conflicts both with common sense and with the ways in which the word *freedom* has been commonly used in English ever since Anglo-Saxon times. It would seem to follow, on this 'absolutist' view of freedom, that ultimately there are no freedoms, and that to talk as if there were is to succumb to an illusion or self-deception. This is a philosophical position that might, one supposes, be congenial to determinists of various persuasions, but otherwise there seems to be no good reason for adopting it.

## 5. FREEDOM AND CONSEQUENCES

Quite different from restrictions on circumstantial grounds are those based on the claim that harm may result from freedom of

speech, and that therefore free speech is not the unalloyed blessing that liberals present it as being, either to the individual or to society. This was a matter that much concerned John Stuart Mill, one of the most eloquent of the liberals in question.

The only legitimate limitation on freedom of speech that Mill recognises involves cases where the free expression of an opinion may, in the circumstances, cause harm to someone (as distinct from merely giving offence). Presumably Dr Johnson thought that sowing doubts about the existence of God would cause harm to the development of young minds. But the onus is on anyone who champions such a view to show that harm is in fact thus caused.

It is sometimes advanced as an objection to Mill that it is not always easy, and may in some cases be impossible, to differentiate clearly between 'giving offence' and 'causing harm'. Mill seems to have mainly in mind the possible use of freedom of speech to incite violence. But there are less blatant cases. Public criticism, for example, even when well founded, may lead to damaging someone's business or career prospects. Even private criticism, although warranted, may damage a person's self-confidence or lead to psychological problems. The answer to this objection is that the practical application of Mill's restriction on freedom of speech may indeed be difficult in particular cases. But the difficulty is caused by the impossibility of knowing in advance the full consequences of expressing an opinion. This, however, is a human limitation which applies to all human behaviour. We can never be quite sure of the long-term consequences of our decisions. That uncertainty is therefore no reason in itself for denying the speaker the freedom in question (any more than ignorance of the possibly undesirable consequences of rescuing a drowning person should inhibit the actions of the rescuer). It is at this point that restricting someone's freedom becomes a question of morality, not of expediency.

A closely related and more relevant objection is that unrestricted freedom of speech may lead to depriving others of that freedom. (Examples would be failure to curb a disruptive child in class, or aggressive and persistent heckling at a public meeting.) Two general points may be made in response. One is that Mill specifically excludes education from the application of his principle, since he grants society 'absolute power' over children during 'the whole period of childhood and nonage' (Mill, 1859, p. 149). The second is that, as Mill would doubtless have agreed, it makes no sense to uphold a freedom if it is invoked to deprive others of it. This does not mean that the principle of freedom of speech contains an inherent contradiction, but simply that rights are not to be used

self-defeatingly. (Thus a free man may not sell himself into slavery (Mill, 1859, p. 173).)

## 6. THREE VIEWS OF EDUCATION

I now turn to the clarification of what is meant by ‘education’. There is no question of looking for what philosophers call a ‘real definition’ where education is concerned. (For the approach to definition which I am adopting here, see Harris and Hutton, 2007.) As Einstein saw in the case of simultaneity, there are cases in which only stipulative definitions can be proposed. Which of the available candidates is to be chosen in the case of ‘education’?

What I am going to argue briefly in this paper is that, basically, there are only three philosophical candidates for this role; or, at least, just three that have been championed within the Western tradition. Furthermore, how you see the issue of freedom of speech as impacting on education will depend on which of these three models of education you adopt.

I am going to associate these three candidates with the names of the three most famous Greek philosophers. I shall call them, in order of their historical appearance, ‘Socratic’, ‘Platonic’ and ‘Aristotelian’.

Since Aristotle was a pupil of Plato’s, and Plato in turn was a pupil of Socrates, it might at first sight seem surprising that they take such different views of what education is all about. Moreover, between the birth of Socrates (c. 469 BC) and the death of Aristotle (322 BC), the relevant time span is no longer than that separating the reign of Queen Victoria from the present day. But during that period profound changes took place in Greek society and in Greek thinking about it.

In adopting the terms ‘Socratic’, ‘Platonic’ and ‘Aristotelian’ I am alluding not so much to what these three philosophers specifically said about education as such (which in the case of Plato was a great deal, but in the case of Socrates very little), but to what follows from their teachings concerning knowledge. (I here go along with Gilbert Ryle and others in assuming that the ‘Socrates’ of *Republic* is obviously Plato’s mouthpiece, whereas the earlier eristic Socratic dialogues present a more authentic reflection of Socrates’ own approach to these questions. I would not perhaps go as far as Karl Popper when he dismisses the Socrates that Plato presents in *Republic* as ‘the embodiment of an unmitigated authoritarianism’ (Popper, 1945, p. 131). But the voice we hear in *Republic* is certainly not the Socratic voice of the eristic dialogues.)

All three philosophers took it for granted, like most upper-class Greeks of their day, that you have to be able to read and write. They always think in terms of a literate society. Whether arguments about education can properly be applied to a preliterate society they do not even bother to discuss. Nevertheless, Classical Greece was hardly a literate society of the kind we are used to today. (For a discussion of changes in views of literacy in the Western tradition, see Harris, 2000.) Classical Greece had no newspapers, no dictionaries, and no printing presses. All books were copied by hand. Aristotle was the first philosopher we hear of who thought it worth while to accumulate a personal library. He collected books. And in those days, that was an unusual thing to do. (On what happened to Aristotle's library after his death, see Canfora, 1987.)

### *The 'Aristotelian' View of Education*

Aristotle's passion for books is worth mentioning at the outset for at least two reasons. One is that Aristotle arguably had far more influence on later liberal views of education than his two great predecessors. The other reason is that what Aristotle thought about education is intimately connected with the availability of books.

The 'Aristotelian' view of education, as I am calling it, amounts to this. Education is inquiry into *everything*, plus dissemination of the resultant knowledge. By 'everything' is meant all there is to be known, ranging from the human soul to the anatomy of animals. Aristotle's collected works cover ethics, politics, poetry, astronomy and much more. He was, in short, a polymath, an inveterate collector of facts. Hence the passion for books. Books are, for Aristotle, storehouses of information. You cannot keep all the information about the world in your head. That is why you need books: both to record the information you yourself have collected, and to have access to the information that others have collected.

From the 'Aristotelian' perspective on education, freedom of speech is essential, because if there is any prohibition on discussing or presenting in public any set of topics, that automatically imposes limits on human knowledge, and to that extent cripples education. Thus, for example, if it is punishable heresy to teach the Copernican doctrine of a heliocentric universe, that immediately blocks or even closes down certain potential avenues of astronomical inquiry. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same goes for any item in the public educational curriculum. The state must not, for whatever reason, ban from its educational institutions and practices the expression of views about any subject whatsoever. Applying this principle today has highly

controversial implications: it means, for instance, that there is no warrant for denying freedom of speech in the classroom to teachers and lecturers who hold allegedly 'extremist' views concerning, say, the legitimacy of overthrowing a government by force. Or for banning from a university campus overt criticisms of religion deemed to be offensive to believers. Or for refusing to allow 'creationism' to be taught alongside Darwin.

### *The 'Platonic' View of Education*

Plato took a quite different view of education. Plato did not believe that the acquisition of knowledge consisted in going out, carefully observing the world, and taking good note of what you found there. Plato was deeply sceptical about observation, and about relying on anything that our senses tell us. He believed that philosophical reflection was the only path to knowledge. But he also believed that education was essential for a just society. Putting these two together, one reaches the conclusion that the only way to achieve a just society is to have philosophers in charge. And that is roughly what Plato held. Much of his most celebrated work, the *Republic*, is devoted to explaining what education is required for those who are to be in charge of society, the guardians of true philosophical values.

Hence Plato had no time for studying such trivia as the anatomy of fishes or poetic metre. He does not concern himself, as Aristotle does at one point, with explaining why the Libyan ostrich has eyelashes. Plato equates education with the upbringing of those who are destined to govern society and to decide between right and wrong, justice and injustice. (I assume it makes no difference to the laws of Libya whether the ostrich has eyelashes or not. But I could be wrong about that.) The 'Platonic' view – preparation for leadership of one's country – provides the basis for what Bertrand Russell scathingly condemned as the British 'education of a gentleman' of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It had survived to his own day. 'Certainly the idle rich who at present infest the older universities very often derive no benefit from them, but merely contract habits of dissipation' (Russell, 1926, p. 195).

Freedom of speech, however, is potentially inimical to the 'Platonic' view of education. Herein lies the explanation of Plato's much discussed 'banishment of the artists'. The interdiction in question, proposed in *Republic*, was actually directed against teaching certain kinds of poetry, but, as pointed out in Murdoch 1977, its scope has been much exaggerated by modern commentators. Nevertheless, the general point remains valid: freedom of speech may well conflict in

certain cases with the priorities of state education, whether those envisaged by Plato or by other authorities.

Censorship of the curriculum is explicitly recommended in *Republic* 377b,c; while in *Laus* 765e we are told that 'by far the most important of all the supreme offices in the state' is that of Minister of Education. This is no exaggeration if one assumes, with Plato, that the welfare of the whole community depends on the education that the state provides for its leaders.

### *The 'Socratic' View of Education*

Socrates has a different view again from either Plato or Aristotle. The first thing to understand about Socrates is that he refused on principle to put any of his teachings into writing. This refusal is directly related to his understanding of education. Education cannot be had from books. His reasons for thinking this are explained in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Furthermore, if *Letter VII* is genuine, it would seem that Plato himself shared that scepticism to some extent. For although Plato did not follow Socrates' example in avoiding writing altogether, this makes sense of Plato's own decision to bequeath philosophy to posterity predominantly if not entirely in dialogue form, rather than as a series of continuous, structured prose texts leading smoothly from the analysis of a problem to its solution.

The objection to writing hinges crucially on the fact that writing is a technology which automatically divorces a text from its author and the circumstances of its composition. The written text takes on a life and authority of its own, irrespective of the intentions of its author, whom it can long outlive. This is why Socrates condemns any thinker who is foolish enough to publish his serious thoughts in writing. It is an act of irresponsibility, rather like leaving a dangerous contrivance where it might come into the possession of those unaware of the danger. What Socrates sees as the disadvantages of writing were precisely what were seen as merits by those who devised the curriculum for the medieval universities of Europe. The universities offered an education that was essentially based on the preservation, copying and study of texts – a prospect that would have horrified Socrates had he lived to see it.

What marks Socrates' thinking is a supreme indifference to society and social values. He just did not care what other people thought of his teachings. It is no accident that he was eventually put on trial for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. And it is typical of the man that he refused to recant – as he easily could have done – and preferred to be put to death.

So what I am calling a ‘Socratic’ view of education parts company at the outset with all those later European theorists, from Herbart onwards, who assumed that education was essentially about teaching the young the right social values. From the ‘Socratic’ perspective, you can still be an educated individual even if you are constantly at loggerheads with the society in which you happen to live, and with that society’s accepted standards.

The death of Socrates is one of the great landmarks in intellectual history. He was put to death not by a vindictive tyrant but under a democracy. The democracy decided to deny Socrates any further freedom of speech by the radical means of silencing his voice permanently. Socrates’ death teaches the unforgettable lesson that a democracy can be as profoundly mistaken in its judgments as any dictator. The majority is not always right. The death of Socrates also teaches us the lesson that it takes a remarkable individual to value personal intellectual integrity above the dictates of society.

But it is also fundamental to the ‘Socratic’ view of education that you have to learn *how* to value your own beliefs, and be prepared to defend them. It’s no good just proclaiming ‘I believe this’ or ‘I believe that’, and letting the matter rest there. That is not a mark of education, but of pig-headedness.

The ‘Socratic’ view thus distinguishes from the start between education and mere instruction or training. One of the problems with modern educational theory is a tendency to overlook or conflate these three crucial distinctions. However well you instruct someone, in the sense of explaining a difficult subject or how to do something that requires specialist knowledge, you do not *eo ipso* educate that person. The learner can acquire an enormous amount of information both at school and university, and still remain uneducated.

Similarly, education is not to be confused with training. However well trained you are, in whatever field, you are not necessarily educated.

Socrates says nothing about the best way to teach children how to read, or write, or count. He just assumes that these skills that require training in certain technical proficiencies must be mastered by anyone who is ready to embark on the process of education. The classic example is that of the slave boy in *Meno*, who, prompted by Socrates, learns to think for himself about an elementary geometrical problem. But even that achievement would be impossible unless the lad could count.

It is interesting to speculate what Socrates’ reaction might have been to the kind of freedom of speech nowadays approved by

advocates of what is called ‘democratic’ education. This, in its more radical forms, allows children the right to be educated as they choose, including the right to advocate and practise refusal to attend classes. One suspects Socrates would have regarded any suppression or avoidance of literacy and elementary arithmetic as tantamount to depriving individuals of the very *possibility* of becoming educated citizens.

Nor was Socrates concerned with what most people nowadays would call the ‘psychology of education’. That is another great confusion in contemporary thinking. Most of what passes for philosophy of education is actually psychology of teaching, which is not philosophy at all. Another modern muddle.

Socrates’ readiness to admit his own ignorance is legendary. It is neither false modesty nor disguised arrogance. For Socrates, there is only one *method* of education, which he himself follows. It consists in pitting one view against its opposite by a process of question-and-answer. In short, you will only acquire an *education* by debate. That is why nearly all the Socratic dialogues consist of long-drawn-out confrontations between diametrically opposed antagonists. This is the forum in which the great intellectual questions are posed. ‘What is truth?’ ‘What is justice?’ ‘What is a fact?’ ‘What is a sound argument?’

Acquiring masses of information – in the manner practised by Aristotle – just does not answer any of those questions. Nor does it matter, as Plato supposed, whether or not you are being brought up in order to govern society. Education, for Socrates, has no social objective, even though society may be the ultimate beneficiary. Education is a matter of developing your own potential as an individual mind. Nothing of intellectual substance is to be taken for granted, whether from your peers or from your would-be educators. That is Socrates’ message to posterity. It is arguably the most valuable message about education that has ever been given in the Western tradition. An educated society, in the ‘Socratic’ view, is a society that not only recognises *but acts on* the priority of that message.

## 7. IDEALISATION AND PRACTICE

To sum up thus far, we are dealing with three grand philosophical idealisations, all of which have played a role in Western thinking about education. The ‘Socratic’ ideal is based on taking the individual mind, the ‘Platonic’ on taking the state, and the ‘Aristotelian’ on taking the universe – as indicating the goals and limits of worthwhile knowledge. If this analysis is roughly right, it becomes clear that a different view will be taken of freedom of speech in education, depending on which of these three educational ideals is being pursued.

Manifestly, in educational practice we encounter all kinds of compromise between the three. But the weight given to each one nevertheless remains important. Furthermore, keeping the three ideals in mind is helpful in assessing the merits of various forms of compromise.

There is a case for saying that, if we are pursuing either a ‘Socratic’ or an ‘Aristotelian’ philosophy of education, the requirement of freedom of speech is paramount. That case has never been put more clearly than it was by Mill in his essay *On Liberty* (1859). If discussion of certain topics is banned (for whatever reason), or if only certain views about them can be expressed, there can never be any guarantee that important questions have been thoroughly examined from all sides.

It is ironic that Mill was a great champion of compulsory state education. He believed – naively – that:

Were the duty of enforcing universal education once admitted there would be an end to the difficulties about what the State should teach, and how it should teach, which now convert the subject into a mere battlefield for sects and parties, causing the time and labour which should have been spent in educating to be wasted in quarrelling about education. (Mill, 1859, p. 176)

At the same time he insisted on the necessity of separating the content and format of education from state control, and thereby articulated a telling critique of the ‘Platonic’ position on education and its ‘guardians’.

A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another; and as the mould in which it casts them is that which pleases the predominant power in the government – whether this be a monarch, a priesthood, an aristocracy, or the majority of the existing generation – in proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading to one over the body. (Mill, 1859, p. 177)

In Mill’s terms, Plato’s wise philosopher-guardians of education would qualify as a ‘priesthood’ seeking to enforce such a despotism over the mind.

Freedom of inquiry presupposes freedom of speech, and without freedom of inquiry there is no hope of pushing back the frontiers of ignorance. No serious ‘Aristotelian’ can rest content with a ban on the scientific investigation of certain areas of knowledge, even if it upsets many who fear the possible results (such as the production of

human/animal hybrids or other forms of ‘genetic engineering’). For these may well be just the areas that might shed light on problems currently insoluble.

### 8. THE PRIORITY OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH

I now wish to take Mill’s argument one step further than Mill does. I shall maintain that in education, as conceived either according to a ‘Socratic’ or an ‘Aristotelian’ philosophy of education, freedom of speech must take priority over all other freedoms, however desirable they may be in themselves. This imperative implies a rejection of the view taken by those who hold that when different freedoms conflict with one another, the issue must be resolved in each case on its local merits, and that no order of priority can be laid down in advance that is valid for all cases.

The reason for saying that education is one context where an order of priority can – and must – be observed is this. Where there is no freedom of speech, there can be no guarantee that the education being provided is itself conducive to freedom of thought. The possibility remains, in other words, that the educational process itself is impeding access – either unwittingly or deliberately – to certain truths and insights that might be of immense value both to the individual and to society in general.

I think this holds also for any educational compromise in which the ‘Socratic’ ideal survives at all, even when in conjunction – as is usually the case – with various ‘Platonic’ and ‘Aristotelian’ elements. In brief, an education which does not afford or cultivate the freedom to cast doubt on its own value is not an education worth having. Failure in education, on this view, is any educational process in which those questions are never raised.

### 9. FREE SPEECH AS THE PREREQUISITE FOR OTHER FREEDOMS

Finally, although I have no space to argue in detail for it here, I would wish to advocate a view of freedom in which that conclusion is generalised from the particular case of education to all cases of freedom. In other words, freedom is, in the first instance, freedom of speech. Freedom of speech is the archetypal freedom.

It is important to realise this in an age when, particularly in the sciences, freedom of inquiry and experiment is increasingly controlled by legal restrictions. Robert Laughlin, a Nobel laureate in physics, has recently written a book called *The Crime of Reason* (2008), in which he points out that over the past 50 years an increasing number

of areas of inquiry have gradually been made illegal. You can now be prosecuted for undertaking academic research on subjects which have been placed out of bounds by government agencies or private corporations who have patented the research methods. It is an Orwellian scenario, and the way the Western academic community conducts itself at the moment is inevitably bringing that scenario closer to realisation.

The general rationale for giving priority to freedom of speech can be stated very succinctly. For any proposed freedom *F*, being free may turn out to be an illusion if there has been no opportunity to test the freedom claimed against contrary opinions. In short, we cannot *know* that we enjoy freedom *F* – we cannot even know what exercising that freedom would be – until *F* itself has been subjected to and survived unrestricted critical scrutiny. And that in turn requires freedom of speech. For if we rely on anything short of that, the freedom we had imagined we were exercising may be illusory.

It goes without saying – I would hope – that to this general principle freedom of speech itself is no exception.

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