Fear and Freedom of Speech

Option 2: General Condition of Freedom of Speech

American freedom of speech was modeled on classical tradition. In Ancient Greece, there existed two words that are both translated as “free speech.” *Isagoria* was the “the equal opportunity of all Athenian citizens to speak in the principal political institution of the democracy” while *parrhesia* refers to the ability to openly and honestly address the Assembly once given the floor.\(^1\) It may seem like both definitions of “freedom of speech” were confined to a political sphere, but in a democracy like Athens all parts of life were civic, and they fell under that political sphere. American democracy is similar in that regard; Americans value free speech for its applicability to most aspects of public and private life. Freedom of speech is defined as “the freedom to express one’s opinions without censorship, legal penalty.”\(^2\) The first amendment protects this civil liberty, which states that Congress can pass no law that abridges freedom of speech. That in itself does not seem bad at all. Ideally, everyone should be able to express themselves freely in and outside of a political environment. Problems arise when people with differing ideas are unable to accept that the opposing party has the same right to freely express themselves. The greatest threat to freedom of speech is the backlash against it from people who fear the abuse of this liberty by others who do not express themselves civilly.

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Over time, the parameters of free speech have become clearer. Through many court cases, the government and the people have worked together to establish the boundaries in which a form of expression can be considered to fall under the umbrella of “freedom of speech”. The right to peacefully protest, to remain silent, “To use certain offensive words and phrases to convey political messages”, “To contribute money…to political campaigns”, “To advertise commercial products and professional services”, and “to engage in symbolic speech” are all protected by the first amendment. These cases have also helped define what is not part of protected speech: “To incite actions that would harm others”, “to make or distribute obscene materials”, etc. The verdicts reached in these civil cases have given us guidelines with which to conduct ourselves without breaching our own civil liberties. People are free to express their beliefs and ideas provided that said beliefs and ideas are not a breach to the guidelines.

In our present society, there is a massive concern with the expression of ideas. Some people fret over the words they use, things they say, and the ideas that they share because they fear they will be attacked for their beliefs. Others also worry, but for fear of causing offense. These are all valid concerns; the issue is that some think that these worries are reason enough to limit freedom of speech. It is more than fair to be concerned when groups with different beliefs attack each other, but free speech is not the culprit of the attacks. Free speech does not promote physical violence, and it cannot control people’s reactions to hearing disagreeable things. Neither is free speech responsible for people taking offense from other people’s words. Those issues are created by the people.

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4 **“What does free speech mean?”**
If person A says that the Longhorns are the best, then person A is within her rights to share her opinion. If person B tells person A that she is wrong, the Oklahoma Sooners are the best, then he is within his rights to do so. If, however, either person A or person B takes action against the other, be it by form of physical assault or by inciting the other to cause harm to themselves or others, then he or she would be violating the protections set on free speech. In that case, repercussions must befall the perpetrator, not the civil liberty which when respected causes no harm.

Let’s suppose that neither A nor B resort to physical means of attack. Rather, A verbally attacks B by making rude comments about his ethnicity. This type of behavior is called hate speech, and is defined as any type of “address inciting hatred or intolerance, esp. towards a particular social group on the basis of ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexuality, etc.” Hate speech is technically not a violation of free speech—so long as the verbal aggression doesn’t include telling someone to commit suicide or self-harm, or otherwise incite harmful actions; in which case person A would be abusing free speech—person A would be within her rights to express herself, awful as her beliefs may be.

It is this type of behavior that leads people to feel unsafe when sharing their opinions. It causes fear, and that fear makes people feel the need to restrict free speech to avoid potential aggressive behavior. People advocate in favor of restricting free speech to create a safer society. Cutting off the means for people to express their ideas does not mean that they won’t still hold the same beliefs, the only difference is they will no longer be allowed to openly express them.

Using a pop culture example to illustrate a situation not dissimilar from the current American

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socio-political climate, in J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* books, the Wizarding World is a stagnant society that has not seen much change since the middle ages. An elite group of “Purebloods,” those from a long magical lineage, hold views equivalent to our society’s racist, anti-Semitic, and white supremacist views. In the Purebloods case, however, speaking about their beliefs freely is not advised due to the recent war against the villain Lord Voldemort, who had rallied under the blood purist banner. This prompted them to hide their true beliefs to fit into society. That does not mean that their ideas had changed, and the unwillingness of people in their world to openly discuss blood purity could have very well been a factor that contribute to their unchanging view. In the books, the lack of change in the mindset of the people led them to side again with Voldemort during the second break out of war. Even though there had been fourteen years between the first and second wars, people ignored the reasons for the wars. Instead they should have looked at the reason for their existence in the first place. The lack of open dialogue and discussion of differing ideas without the use of violence did not allow for a change in society.

In the previous example, war could be considered to be a form of extremist free speech. This is not the free speech I am referring to when I talk about the benefits of exchange of ideas. Violence should have no part in free speech. That is something people should be educated on. Therein lies the root of the problem. There is a lack of proper education when it comes to free speech. In the Harry Potter universe, things could have gone a lot differently if during the years before the second war if the children attending Hogwarts had been taught how to engage in arguments in a respectful and responsible way. The fourteen-year gap would have allowed for a whole generation to learn to disagree without the need to resort to violence, and trough the exchange of ideas perhaps a few of the purebloods would have learned to see the world with
different eyes. Similarly, in the United States, by allowing freedom of speech and educating our citizens, as well as by promoting tolerance, we allow for people to shape each other. And even if there are still people who hold radical views and decide to act upon them, there are laws in place to protect others from their behavior and to punish the perpetrators without the need to further restrict free speech.

In school, children are taught that free speech is one of their individual rights. No one has the power to ban their freedom of expression. What they are not taught is how to responsibly and assertively make use of their constitutional right. Children may be forced to participate in a few debates in high school, but they do not receive proper instruction in how to act and react when faced with a person whose views are completely opposed to their own, and which they may very well find repulsive.

The first time I stepped into an ice-ring, I was afraid to fall as I had no experience with skating, let alone ice-skating. My parents suggested I let myself fall so I could learn how to land without hurting myself seriously, so I did. I learned how to fall first, and that made learning to skate so much easier. Learning to disagree is like learning to fall. One does it first to a) get rid of the fear, and b) prepare oneself for any falls in the real world. Children should be taught how to disagree, how to have and argument without the need for screaming matches or flying punches before they go out into the world and encounter real arguments where violent reactions can land them in prison, or worse.

In an idyllic society, people would be taught how to disagree with others, not for the sake of causing more disagreements, but to allow people to learn how to be respectful of other’s ideas and beliefs regardless of how different they are from their own. Learning to communicate properly—saying what you want to say with tact—is something everyone ought to do. The
exchange of ideas is vital for the growth and development of society. Cutting up that exchange for the sake of “keeping everyone happy” by not allowing them to hear things they might not like will only result in the stagnation of ideas and will yield a generation that—having been raised with a “my-way-is-the-only-way” mentality—will be unable to cope with their ideas and beliefs being disputed.

The fear that aggression in the face of disagreements and differing ideals brings forth in people, and the backlash against that fear in the form of advocating for stricter regulation of free speech is the biggest threat to American freedom of speech. Although in many cases concern due to the ideas expressed by a group of people is entirely fair, restricting freedom of speech will do nothing to change those ideas. It would mask them, giving only the illusion of a society in which everyone is in agreement with each other. If there is one thing people should be in agreement of is the need for respect to be shown to anyone and everyone who expresses their ideas. Teaching people how to disagree while maintaining a respect for the ideas of the other, no matter how much they might be in opposition to their own, and fomenting tolerance amongst people with different ideologies is the only way we can protect free speech and truly make sure that it will remain protected in later generations.
Bibliography


