

Editorial

## Editorial

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One year after the official launch of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, we are pleased to present the first issue to our readers.

Although we began accepting submissions in April 2020, this journal has been in the making since 2013, when we began to notice a new kind of reaction to academic publications.

We—the editors, as well as some members of our editorial board—had previously dealt with angry reactions from the non-academic public, but the situation changed after the internet became the unregulated global agora it is today. As the world became increasingly interconnected and digitalized, academic conversation altered quite profoundly.

Twenty years ago, most academic journals were available only in university libraries, or to paid subscribers, and hence almost exclusively to academics. Nowadays, many journals have an online version that is accessible to everyone in the world and even if the journal is behind a paywall, it only takes one person to cut and paste a passage and distribute it via Twitter or Facebook for everyone to be able to read it.

The benefits of the digitalization of information are undeniable. The internet has allowed academics to make their research available to a vast audience, widening its potential impact and increasing the quantity and quality of information now accessible to everyone. This is one of the great achievements of our era. Yet what is widely shared over the internet is often neither genuine academic work, nor popularized but accurate accounts of academic work, but instead the conclusions of academic articles taken out of context and stripped of the reasons for holding them. These distorted conclusions are then circulated to people who are liable to respond with outrage, and this outraged response then proliferates in the manner typical of social media. Some academics get death threats, while others may justifiably fear that their career prospects have been irreversibly damaged. Understandably, they and others who see what has happened to them may decide that the cost of continuing to work in a controversial area is too high.

Angry reactions from the public are an unpleasant experience that can have an inhibiting effect on academic research; but there are more serious threats that come from within the universities.

Some students have demanded that speakers holding views they consider offensive be prevented from speaking at their university, and that professors holding views the students consider objectionable should be sanctioned or even dismissed. Some topics, and even entire areas of research are now considered off limits, and teachers are required to adapt to the new curriculum and choose their syllabi accordingly.

Ronald Dworkin regarded “the paradigmatic duty” of professors and others who teach and study in universities to be “to discover and teach what they find important and true.” He added that this duty can override what is in the best interests of the audience.<sup>1</sup> Clearly this conception of the university is now under threat.

Surprisingly, these attempts to stifle academic debate often receive support from academics themselves. In recent years there has been a surge in open letters and petitions denouncing researchers and their work, signed by academics who seem to be unwilling to rely on the traditional academic practice of finding flaws in the arguments with which they disagree. They instead demand that administrators sanction colleagues who have expressed ideas they oppose. Some of these petitions, signed by hundreds of academics, even demand that editors retract published articles that have passed standard peer review processes. In an alarming number instances, editors have been cowed by these demands and have succumbed to them. A few who have defended academic freedom have been compelled to resign.

All this indicates that freedom of thought and discussion in the universities is no longer a universally held value, even among academics. So we must ask: why should academics be free to write and teach whatever they want, including what most people find tasteless, unnecessarily provocative, or even dangerous? One reason is that when the open discussion of certain ideas is suppressed, the ideas don't disappear. Instead they are discussed in forums read only by people who are attracted to them, and are never exposed to counter-arguments. The ideas become more virulent and irrational, and more influential than they would have been had their purveyors been openly refuted rather than being transformed into martyrs by being silenced or persecuted.

A second reason why freedom of expression matters is that it is only by discussing *all* ideas—even those that many regard as offensive or immoral—that we get closer to the truth. Moral, intellectual, and material progress in human history are the results of a constant exchange of ideas, many of which were initially considered abhorrent, and there is no reason to believe that this pattern has changed. When some answers to questions are considered taboo, how can we be confident that we are not in error? It is not difficult to find past examples of ideas that when first advanced were suppressed, but are now recognized as having contributed greatly to our knowledge, or our moral progress.

Socrates, Jesus of Nazareth, Giordano Bruno, and Galileo Galilei were considered so dangerous that authorities tried to silence them, and in the case of Socrates, Jesus, and Bruno, as well as many of Bruno's lesser-known contemporaries, the persecution ended in execution. The *Index of Prohibited Books*, established by the Council of Trent in 1564 and discontinued only in 1966, included books by Hobbes, Pascal, Descartes, Spinoza, Voltaire, Hume, Rousseau, Kant, Bentham, Mill, Sartre, De Beauvoir, and many more.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Dworkin, “We Need a New Interpretation of Academic Freedom. Academic Freedom and the Future of the University Lecture Series,” *Academe* 82, no. 3 (1996): 10–15.

Many authors have published their more controversial work either anonymously or under pseudonyms in an effort to protect their lives, liberty, and careers. If the history of freedom of thought and expression teaches us anything, it is that scholars must not stop inquiring when their inquiries lead them to answers that displease them or that displease their government, religious authorities, colleagues, employers, potential employers, or other members of their society. They have a duty to go further, to pursue ideas as deeply as possible, and to follow arguments to their logical conclusions—especially when they lead to disturbing conclusions people don't want to hear. The truth may be concealed among those unsettling thoughts.

In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill offered a third reason in support of freedom of thought and discussion that is especially significant in the context of a university or other educational institution. Even if we are correct in our belief that we already know the truth on some topic of great importance, and that the contrary ideas we suppress are erroneous, to suppress those opposing ideas is, Mill said, to turn that true belief into a dead dogma. If we want it to be a living truth, to appreciate the reasons for it, and to understand why we are justified in continuing to believe it, we must allow it to be challenged.<sup>2</sup>

We have launched this journal because we have become concerned that in the current social and cultural climate, some people will not feel free to explore ideas that may embroil them in unwelcome controversy. As a result, some of our false beliefs will not be shown to be false, while some of our true beliefs will become dead dogmas and more vulnerable to attack because they are not defended against apparently plausible objections. Researchers at an early stage of an academic career may be so worried about the repercussions of controversial publications that they end up focusing only on uncontroversial research, even when they think that there is something potentially more significant to explore. By permitting publication under a pseudonym, we hope to enable authors to fulfil their duty to pursue the truth without putting their careers or physical or mental security at risk. Intellectual and moral progress should not require heroes or martyrs.

While it is perfectly normal to feel annoyed, threatened, offended, or even insulted when our deep beliefs are challenged, we should respond with reason and argument, rather than outrage. No one should ever ask their colleagues to retract a paper that has been accepted after peer review, except on such grounds as demonstrable error, misrepresentation of data, or plagiarism. Disagreements should be settled by exposing the purported mistake, not by attempting to suppress the idea or punish the author. We need to teach students how to disagree, not how to silence people with whom they disagree. And we need to show the media and the public that presenting controversial ideas is not our privilege, but rather our duty—even when they hate us for what we have to say. As Fritz Machlup said, “Academic freedom is a right of the people, not a privilege of a few. . . . It is the people at large who have a right to the cultural and material benefits that may flow from the teaching and the inquiries of scholars who have nothing to fear when they make honest mistakes.”<sup>3</sup>

We hope that the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* will, by providing a forum for discussing controversial ideas in a reasonable and non-polemical way, promote freedom of thought and discussion. By introducing fellow academics and the lay public to a

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<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, (1859), chapter 2.

<sup>3</sup> Fritz Machlup, “On some misconceptions concerning academic freedom,” *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (1915-1955) 41, no. 4 (1955): 753–84.

healthy and lively debate about ideas that are genuinely controversial, we seek to foster appreciation of reasoned discussion and pave the way for more fruitful public and academic debate.

Three out of the ten authors publishing an article in this first issue have chosen to use a pseudonym, a choice that some will find objectionable. Indeed, when we announced that we would allow authors to use a pseudonym, we were criticized by people who argued that authors need to be accountable for the content of their papers, and so should not have the option of concealing their identity. In an ideal world, we would accept this view, but we do not live in such a world. The history of philosophy is replete with instances of philosophers who concealed the authorship of at least some of their works: Descartes, Locke, Spinoza, Voltaire, and Hume, among others. Ideas ought to be judged on their own merits, not on the basis of any characteristic of the person who happened to formulate them.

Judging the strength and significance of arguments is not easy. Since we issued our Call for Papers one year ago, we have received 91 submissions, accepted 10, rejected 68 and we are still processing 13. We have put a lot of effort into finding the right reviewers and providing the authors with constructive, though often challenging, comments. The ten papers in this first issue cover a variety of topics and perspectives. Collectively, they support our conviction that some interesting and important public conversations will take place only if there is a forum in which controversial ideas can be published and, if the author wishes, published under a pseudonym. This does not mean that we, the editors, believe all or perhaps any of the ideas presented here are right or that they are more worthy of attention than ideas published in other journals. Possibly most readers will find at least one of these articles distasteful, misguided, infuriating, or offensive. Our claim is only that the ideas articulated and defended in these articles are worth discussing. Indeed, we welcome the submission of papers that critically discuss articles in this issue – albeit by criticizing the ideas rather than the authors.

In establishing the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, we said that we would be neutral with respect to political, philosophical, religious, and social views. We believe that the papers published in this first issue, based on the recommendations of our reviewers, support this claim. We have done our best to be impartial between papers attacking ideas favoured by liberals or progressives and papers attacking ideas favoured by conservatives or libertarians.

It would have not been possible to launch this journal without the help of Yuan Li. Yuan, who works on scholarly communications in the Princeton University library, generously helped us to find a publisher and to deal with bureaucratic issues we might never have got past without her knowledge, skills, and kindness through the long years during which this journal was only a project. We are extremely grateful to her.

Lyn Hagan has also been very generous with her time, not only in designing the logo of our publisher, the Foundation for Freedom of Thought and Discussion, but also in helping us set up a crowdfunding page to support the journal.

We would also like to thank Filippo Menghi, the talented graphic designer who generously designed the logo of the journal.

A special thanks goes to our Founding Donors: Rebecca Cook, Bernard Dickens, James Evans, Fastackl, Kathryn Hinsch, Frances Kissling, and Christoph Moes. Their generous donations have allowed us to fulfil our aim of making ideas available to all by publishing an open access journal. We are also extremely grateful to everyone who has sent us a donation, no matter how small. We hope eventually to have a large and diverse group of donors. We are committed to never allowing donors to influence what we publish.

Ideally, the need for this journal will be short-lived because our efforts will help to foster cultural conditions in which editors of academic journals will no longer have to worry about publishing controversial papers, and researchers will be able to publish controversial articles in any journal they find appropriate without fearing that doing so will endanger their well-being or career. But until then, we will do our best to make sure that the fear of a hostile response does not intimidate authors from publishing important, well-argued, but controversial ideas.

We would like to dedicate this first issue of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas* to the three members of our editorial board who, sadly, did not live to see the journal become a reality: James Flynn, Roger Scruton, and Walter E. Williams. Their support for freedom of thought and discussion will outlive them, and we hope that their courage and intellectual honesty will be an inspiration to future generations.