

Editorial: A Journal of Controversial Ideas: Samizdat in Oxford

In universities there used to be a doctrine and practice of what was known as academic tenure. This meant that people appointed to academic positions could not be sacked except for criminal or seriously unprofessional conduct. In particular it meant that they could not be sacked for expressing views others might find wrong or objectionable, providing this was done in a reasonable way. The main rationale for tenure, and indeed its only real justification, was protection of freedom of speech and enquiry within the academic realm.

From all sorts of angles in recent times freedom of speech and enquiry in universities (and elsewhere) has become restricted in ways that would have horrified John Stuart Mill. We do not need to go into any detail here, save to make the observation that many academics (and others) feel, rightly or wrongly, that their positions and jobs will be under threat if they express views which go against the prevailing consensus in particular areas. Other academics and university authorities have not always been quick to defend colleagues under attack for questioning contemporary dogma, which might seem to some to bring the whole notion of academic tenure into question, or at least its putative justification.

Mill wrote that 'the beliefs we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded'. We are not here talking about the whole world, but only the academic part of it, where, sadly, the invitation is more often to keep one's head down, one's mouth shut and one's word-processor closed, where the belief in question is one which right-thinking public opinion has deemed to be sacrosanct.

In an effort to restore something of the Millian spirit, the distinguished Oxford philosopher Jeff McMahan and a number of his colleagues have announced their intention of starting a 'Journal of Controversial Ideas'. In this journal authors will be able to break free of the shackles of collegial opprobrium and self-censorship to be able to hold forth controversially (on any topic?) and, apparently, under a pseudonym or anonymously. We congratulate Professor McMahan and his colleagues, though we hope that *Philosophy* has never fought shy of welcoming controversial ideas, providing that they are well argued. But we do see some flaws in the proposal, as

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we understand it, which in a spirit of friendly encouragement we will now mention.

We notice that the journal will be subject to peer review ‘in line with normal academic standards’. There might be a suspicion that ‘normal academic standards’ as currently practiced are themselves a contributory factor in the shutting down of dissent. We have to hope that the reviewers and the editors of the journal will be fully sympathetic to Mill’s standing invitation to attempt to prove our most warranted beliefs unfounded.

Then, more importantly, and assuming that anonymity is both required and maintained, the author of a controversial article will hardly be able to engage in the normal processes of debate and discussion, nor will he or she be able to receive whatever credit or opprobrium that may follow. And the very fact that the article is published anonymously could suggest a certain disengagement on the part of the author. Does he or she really stand by what has been published? Or is there a degree of posturing in the whole exercise?

Then academics are often very jealous of their publications, for career and research assessment purposes. Presumably an anonymous article could not be entered on one’s CV, or count towards a job application. To what extent would this inhibit potential contributors from expensing the time and effort that goes into producing a scholarly article under normal academic constraints?

We can agree that in all likelihood these difficulties could be mitigated or even circumvented. Maybe publication in *Controversial Ideas* will become so prestigious that academics fight to get into its pages, precisely so that they can later announce their authorship to universal acclaim. But amid all the praise and self-congratulation attending the project, mightn’t some feel that we have come to a pretty pass when, with the best of intentions, from within one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the liberal Western world, it has been found necessary to launch what in another place and another time would have been regarded as a samizdat publication?