

The Two Clashing Meanings of 'Free Speech'

Today's campus controversies reflect a battle between two distinct conceptions of the term—what the Greeks called *isegoria* and *parrhesia*.

Teresa M. Bejan, *The Atlantic*, December 2, 2017 (adapted)

Little distinguishes democracy in America more sharply from Europe than the primacy—and permissiveness—of our commitment to free speech. Yet ongoing controversies at American universities suggest that free speech is becoming a partisan issue. While conservative students defend the importance of inviting controversial speakers to campus and giving offense, many self-identified liberals are engaged in increasingly disruptive, even violent, efforts to shut them down. Free speech for some, they argue, serves only to silence and exclude others. Denying hateful or historically “privileged” voices a platform is thus necessary to make *equality* effective, so that the marginalized and vulnerable can finally speak up—and be heard.

The reason that appeals to the First Amendment cannot decide these campus controversies is because there is a more fundamental conflict between two, very different concepts of free speech at stake. The conflict between what the ancient Greeks called *isegoria*, on the one hand, and *parrhesia*, on the other, is as old as democracy itself. Today, both terms are often translated as “freedom of speech,” but their meanings were and are importantly distinct. In ancient Athens, *isegoria* described the equal right of citizens to participate in public debate in the democratic assembly; *parrhesia*, the license to say what one pleased, how and when one pleased, and to whom.

The two ancient concepts of free speech came to shape our modern liberal democratic notions in fascinating and forgotten ways. But more importantly, understanding that there is not one, but two concepts of freedom of speech, and that these are often in tension if not outright conflict, helps explain the frustrating shape of contemporary debates, both in the U.S. and in Europe—and why it so often feels as though we are talking past each other when it comes to the things that matter most.

Of the two ancient concepts of free speech, *isegoria* is the older. The term dates back to the fifth century BC, although historians disagree as to when the democratic practice of permitting any citizen who wanted to address the assembly actually began. Despite the common translation “freedom of speech,” the Greek literally means something more like “equal speech in public.” The verb *agoreuein*, from which it derives, shares a root with the word *agora* or marketplace—that is, a public place where people, including philosophers like Socrates, would gather together and talk.

As a form of free speech then, *isegoria* was essentially political. Its competitor, *parrhesia*, was more expansive. Here again, the common English translation “freedom of speech” can be deceptive. The Greek means something like “all saying” and comes closer to the idea of speaking freely or “frankly.” *Parrhesia* thus implied openness, honesty, and the courage to tell the truth, even when it meant causing offense. The practitioner of *parrhesia* (or *parrhesiastes*) was, quite literally, a “say-it-all.”

Debates about free speech on American campuses today suggest that the rival concepts of *isegoria* and *parrhesia* are alive and well. When student protesters claim that they are silencing certain voices—via no-platforming, social pressure, or outright censorship—in the name of free speech itself, it may be tempting to dismiss them as insincere, or at best confused. As I witnessed at an event at Kenyon College in September, when confronted with such arguments, the response from

40 gray-bearded free-speech fundamentalists like myself is to continue to preach to the converted about the First Amendment, but with an undercurrent of solidaristic despair about “kids these days” and their failure to understand the fundamentals of liberal democracy.

No wonder the “kids” are unpersuaded. While trigger warnings, safe spaces, and no-platforming grab headlines, poll after poll suggests that a more subtle shift in mores is afoot. To a generation
45 convinced that hateful speech is itself a form of violence or “silencing,” pleading the First Amendment is to miss the point. Most of these students do not see themselves as standing against free speech at all. What they care about is the *equal right* to speech, and equal access to a public forum in which the historically marginalized and excluded can be heard and count equally with the privileged. This is a claim to *isegoria*, and once one recognizes it as such, much else becomes
50 clear—including the contrasting appeal to *parrhesia* by their opponents, who sometimes seem determined to reduce “free speech” to a license to offend.

Recognizing the ancient ideas at work in these modern arguments puts those of us committed to America’s parrhesiastic tradition of speaking truth to power in a better position to defend it. It suggests that to defeat the modern proponents of *isegoria*—and remind the modern parrhesiastes
55 what they are fighting for—one must go beyond the First Amendment to the other, orienting principle of American democracy behind it, namely equality. After all, the genius of the First Amendment lies in bringing *isegoria* and *parrhesia* together, by securing the equal right and liberty of citizens not simply to “exercise their reason” but to speak their minds. It does so because the alternative is to allow the powers-that-happen-to-be to grant that liberty as a license to some
60 individuals while denying it to others.

In contexts where the Constitution does not apply, like a private university, this opposition to arbitrariness is a matter of culture, not law, but it is no less pressing and important for that. As the evangelicals, protesters, and provocateurs who founded America’s parrhesiastic tradition knew well: When the rights of all become the privilege of a few, neither liberty nor equality can
65 last.

I. COMPREHENSION

Choisissez la réponse qui vous paraît la plus adéquate en fonction du sens du texte.

- From lines 1 to 8, it should be understood that
 - American citizens are more attached to free speech than Europeans.
 - democracy is very different in the US and in Europe.
 - Americans find Europeans too permissive with free speech.
 - Americans and Europeans are more or less equally prone to free speech.
- From lines 1 to 8, it should be understood that for liberal students
 - free speech does not exist.
 - free speech requires the silence and exclusion of conservatives.
 - free speech is too concentrated on privileged speakers.
 - free speech is what liberals use to exclude minorities.
- From lines 9 to 16, it should be understood that
 - judges don’t like to take care of conflicts on campuses.
 - the First amendment does not help much to solve the conflicts on campuses.
 - the First amendment does not deal with the kind of free speech students use.
 - reasoning is more helpful than the First amendment to solve conflicts on campuses.
- From lines 17 to 22, it should be understood that
 - what matters most is not the first but the second concept.
 - the two concepts are useful when it comes to clarifying debates.
 - the two concepts help to solve debates between Europe and the US.
 - the two competing definitions of free speech make debates hard to settle.

5. From lines 23 to 28, it should be understood that
 (A) *isegoria* differs from the verb *agoreuein*.
 (B) *isegoria* is etymologically related to public talking and debating.
 (C) *isegoria* generally occurred in the agora.
 (D) People had to be philosophers to practice *isegoria*.
6. From lines 29 to 34, it should be understood that *parrhesia*
 (A) does not mean you can say "all" but rather that you must be honest.
 (B) means you need to give offense at all cost.
 (C) means you should always be able to say what you have to say.
 (D) means you should be honest up to a certain degree.
7. From lines 35 to 42, it should be understood that
 (A) it could seem logical to consider student protesters are mistaken about free speech.
 (B) it is tempting for student protesters to censor certain voices.
 (C) it could be tempting to silence student protesters in the name of free speech
 (D) student protesters get confused between no-platform, social pressure and censorship.
8. From lines 35 to 42, it should be understood that
 (A) free-speech fundamentalists wish student protesters showed more solidarity with them.
 (B) free-speech fundamentalists like being confronted with student protesters' arguments.
 (C) the protests on campuses also underscore a generational gap.
 (D) when confronted with student protesters' arguments, free-speech fundamentalists try to convince the former.
9. lines 43 to 51, it should be understood that student protesters
 (A) don't think controversial speeches stand against free speech.
 (B) want to convince that controversial speeches are violent but fail to do so.
 (C) don't realise that they are standing against free speech.
 (D) consider controversial speeches as attacks to free speech.
10. From lines 43 to 51, it should be understood that
 (A) if student protesters silence controversial speakers, it is to make more space for voiceless, marginalised, people.
 (B) equal right to speech matters more to marginalized people than to privileged people.
 (C) student protesters care for equal rights and not for free speech at all.
 (D) student protesters want excluded and marginalized people to be able to hear privileged people.
11. From lines 52 to 60, it should be understood that if holders of *parrhesia* understood their conflict with *isegoria* better,
 (A) they could have a lot of power.
 (B) they would realise that they are mistaken.
 (C) they could defend their right to offend more efficiently.
 (D) they would realise that their ideas are outdated.
12. From lines 52 to 60, it should be understood that the aim of the First amendment is
 (A) to focus on reason and not on "speaking one's mind".
 (B) to avoid the concentration of free speech on a few powerful people.
 (C) to avoid that pro-*isegoria* take over pro-*parrhesia*.
 (D) to make it possible to deny freedom of speech to some people.

II. LEXIQUE

Choisissez la réponse qui vous paraît la plus appropriée en fonction du contexte.

13. ongoing (line 2) means
 (A) sharp
 (B) current
 (C) future
 (D) mild
14. platform (line 7) means
 (A) topic
 (B) right to reply
 (C) space to express themselves
 (D) more prominent position
15. outright (line 19) means
 (A) total
 (B) illegal
 (C) wrongful
 (D) mild
16. deceptive (line 30) means
 (A) disappointing
 (B) too intuitive
 (C) exaggerated
 (D) misleading

17. practitioner (line 33) means
 (A) theoretician
 (B) adept
 (C) doctor
 (D) excessive partisan
18. claim (line 36) means
 (A) affirm
 (B) deny
 (C) suppose
 (D) demand
19. trigger warnings (line 43) means
 (A) warnings against gun violence
 (B) messages in favour of gun violence
 (C) warning shots
 (D) warnings that something might be painful to hear or see
20. mores (line 44) means
 (A) moral conventions
 (B) generations
 (C) increases
 (D) politics

21. afoot (line 44) means
 (A) distant
 (B) forthcoming
 (C) over
 (D) fatal
22. pleading (line 45) means
 (A) seeking justice thanks to
 (B) seeking to convince with
 (C) asking for
 (D) crying over
23. namely (line 56) means
 (A) as well as
 (B) calling it
 (C) generally known as
 (D) that is to say
24. pressing (line 62) means
 (A) stressful
 (B) urgent
 (C) legal
 (D) difficult

III. COMPÉTENCE GRAMMATICALE

Choisissez la réponse adéquate

25.
 (A) Every student should have the same rights than older Americans.
 (B) Every student should have the same rights as older Americans.
 (C) Every student should have the same rights that older Americans.
 (D) Every student should have the same rights from older Americans.
26.
 (A) When I graduated, I have found a job right away.
 (B) When I graduated, I have finded a job right away.
 (C) When I graduated, I found a job right away.
 (D) When I graduated, I finded a job right away.
27.
 (A) The eldest of the two sons left two years ago.
 (B) The oldest of the two sons left two years ago.
 (C) The elder of the two sons left two years ago.
 (D) The older of the two sons left two years ago.

28.
 (A) She managed the situation very skillfully.
 (B) She managed the situation very skilfully.
 (C) She managed the situation very skillfully.
 (D) She managed the situation very skilfully.
29.
 (A) I've been working like a horse.
 (B) I've been working as a horse.
 (C) I've been working as if a horse.
 (D) I've been working like if a horse.
30.
 (A) You should have not lost that paper.
 (B) You shouldn't lost that paper.
 (C) You should haven't lost that paper.
 (D) You shouldn't have lost that paper.
31.
 (A) They organised a serie of conferences.
 (B) They organised a series of conferences.
 (C) They organised a sery of conferences.
 (D) They organised a piece of series of conferences.

32.

- (A) So many books, so little time.
- (B) So much books, so little time.
- (C) So many books, so few time.
- (D) So many books, so less time.

33.

- (A) I'll see her in two next weeks.
- (B) I'll see her in next two weeks.
- (C) I'll see her in the next two weeks.
- (D) I'll see her in the two next weeks.

34.

- (A) This is the James's bike.
- (B) This is James's bike.
- (C) This is James' bike.
- (D) This is the James bike.

35.

- (A) This is the woman who's book I have found.
- (B) This is the woman which book I have found.
- (C) This is the woman whose book I have found.
- (D) This is the woman whom book I have found.

36.

- (A) News is bad.
- (B) The news are bad.
- (C) The new is bad.
- (D) The news is bad.

37.

- (A) The measure amounts to shuttering all restaurants.
- (B) The measure amounts to shutter all restaurants
- (C) The measure amounts in shuttering all restaurants.
- (D) The measure amounts of shuttering all restaurants

38.

- (A) Only now she realises what happened.
- (B) Only now does she realise what happened.
- (C) Only now realises she what happened.
- (D) Only now she does realise what happened.

39.

- (A) We met ourselves in New York City.
- (B) We met each other in New York City.
- (C) We met in New York City.
- (D) We met one another in New York City.