

University of Groningen

Spring News on debates about controversial speakers

Knowles, Charlotte

Published in:
The Philosophers' Magazine

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2019

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Knowles, C. (2019). Spring News on debates about controversial speakers. *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 85(2), 6-10.

Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

Spring News

Charlotte Knowles on debates about controversial speakers

This quarter, the deadline for the magazine has coincided with the unfolding of a philosophy news story. This may be the closest I get to reporting breaking news. However, due to the “liveness” of my reporting, I do not offer the particulars of those involved as, at the time of writing, the issues are still unfolding, and I want to focus on the structure of the case, rather than giving more publicity to the particular issues, or drawing further attention to the individuals themselves.

The one who shouts the loudest and can stick it the longest is the one who “wins”

This is the story of a philosophy professor who wrote a blog post about inviting a speaker known for his controversial right-wing politics to a public philosophy event, and suffered the consequences for sticking his head above the parapet. In the blog, the professor made a subtle point about the authority we lend to speakers by giving them a public platform. He did not call for de-platforming. Indeed, the concluding paragraph of his blog explicitly states:

“Giving a platform to such incitements strengthens them. Yet, de-platform-

ing might turn their protagonists into martyrs. Thus, rescinding an invitation might be just as problematic as making it to begin with. That said, what should worry us perhaps even more are the voices of those who were not invited in the first place. There are many more interesting and pertinent speakers for a night of philosophy.”

However, the way in which the blog post was reported in the university student newspaper and subsequently other news outlets, meant that the subtle point was lost and the professor was presented as saying that “providing a university platform for controversial figures is tantamount to endorsing their positions”. As such, he was taken to be arguing for no-platforming the controversial speaker.

The professor contacted the newspaper and objected to this presentation of his views. The newspaper then edited the article, replacing “endorsing” with “supporting”. Again, the professor objected, but no further changes were made. Following this over simplification of a complicated issue, the discussion quickly deteriorated, as it so frequently does, into a debate about free speech.

The professor received a great deal of ire, including an email comparing him to Hitler. The controversial speaker wrote an open letter to the rector of the university

where the professor in question is based. In the letter he questioned the “quality of teaching staff” in the faculty, and in a subsequent interview with the university’s newspaper asserted that if the next public philosophy event

“should be followed by ‘open discussions’ about who is invited and who is not, then I think that few speakers will be willing to act. Anyway, it’s not up to me to judge. You can agree to try that new invitation policy and see who wants to submit to such a humiliating treatment. My suspicion: not many speakers.”

*The issue is not one
about whether such
views should be heard,
but about the way in
which they’re heard and
in what context*

Presumably the controversial speaker is labouring under the assumption that most programmes of events are decided on the basis of the organisers sitting in a room, concentrating very hard, and hoping that telepathically they will all agree on the same speaker without uttering a word. A novel, but risky strategy.

In a subsequent blog post, the professor further clarified his position, now forced to engage with the characterisation of the disagreement over the invitation as an issue of freedom of speech:

“(1) If you assume that denying someone to speak at a university is a denial of free speech, then you must at least tacitly believe that everyone should have the right to call themselves a doctor. The right to free speech is not tantamount to the right to be invited to speak at a university or to anyone else’s duty to listen. Otherwise the university would have to invite everyone, because everyone has the right to free speech.”

The professor went on to highlight the irony of the abuse he endured as a result of speaking freely and airing his opinion on the invitation of the controversial speaker:

“(2) My note of protest was not a call for ‘de-platforming’ but a free expression of my personal opinion, as stated in my earlier post. Thus, the framing as a free speech issue rendered the whole matter absurd and perniciously misrepresented not only my own opinion but also the position of the dean and, by extension, other fellow philosophers in my faculty.”

Meanwhile, the controversial speaker published another article in which he argued that “for teachers who undermine the academic ideal of independent science, it must be made unsafe”, immediately followed by “I already know one such teacher” and then naming the professor.

Over the last three years this column has reported multiple times on different issues that all fit roughly this same structure. Dissent on a controversial topic is exploded into a circus. The issues that end up being discussed are not the ones the discussion began with. An individual is singled out and



© Adele Juraza

attacked, putting off others from engaging with controversial issues in a public forum. Ultimately the one who shouts the loudest and can stick it the longest is the one who “wins”, if we can even say that there are any winners in such cases.

When these scripts are played out, the issue is almost always far more complex than “to platform or not to platform”. The more interesting and nuanced questions are about what kind of views we give credence to and in what way. Recently, it has become increasingly popular to question whether women are really systematically oppressed. But are they though? Are they really? Or can we explain it away with #Science or #UnspecifiedMultivariedAnalysis. The strategies that put into question, for example, the idea of the oppression of minority groups in society, often do so on the basis of #Facts, the citing of which is supposed to show how “hysterical” the liberal snowflakes are when they react. When #Facts like “women aren’t underrepresented in STEM subjects because of institutional biases, it’s just that women don’t like science”, evoke the exact reactions they were designed to evoke, they are then followed up with rhetorical devices to the effect of “aaah see snowflake!” or “hysterical liberal”.

Think, for example, of the Jordan Peterson interview on Channel 4 conducted by Cathy Newman, after which she was roundly criticised for not maintaining a neutral tone when told by Peterson that the gender pay gap “doesn’t exist”. When someone is denying the reality of your situation or questioning the treatment you experience in daily life, these are understandably #Facts that might cause your voice to raise above a monotone register. But any kind of reac-

tion other than “yes, please come and sh*t on my face and tell me again how I’m not oppressed”, is deemed “hysterical”.

Moreover, rather than just shouting “free speech, FREE SPEECH FREE SPEECH” at an ever-increasing volume, we might ask what purpose it serves to give an authoritative platform to such views. The issue is not one about whether such views should be heard, but about the way in which they’re heard and in what context. For example, we might question whether views like “the gender pay gap doesn’t exist” might not be better suited to being shouted from a street corner or in a field Theresa May may or may not be running through, rather than being entertained on the Channel 4 News. For one thing, it’s exhausting and time consuming to be forced again and again to engage with debates about whether women *really* get paid less, or whether we should *really* spend time encouraging underrepresented groups into certain disciplines when you’ve got sandwiches to eat or episodes of Homes Under the Hammer to catch up on.

So rather than always ending up shouting “free speech” or “no platform”, which doesn’t get us anywhere, maybe we should spend more time looking at the tactics and the presentation of material, attending to the way new debates get skewed to fit old formulas and existing scripts, and asking about who we really want to listen to on a Friday night, which ironically was the professor’s point all along.

Charlotte Knowles is an assistant professor in ethics, social and political philosophy at the University of Groningen.