

— LETTERS  
on LIBERTY



**WHY DEBATING MATTERS**

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Welcome to *Letters on Liberty* from the Academy of Ideas. *Letters on Liberty* is a modest attempt to reinvigorate the public sphere and argue for a freer society.

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Since its foundation in 2000, the Academy of Ideas has hosted thousands of public debates, festivals, forums and salons where people from all walks of life come together to debate often-controversial topics and to challenge contemporary knee-jerk orthodoxies.

We always hold on to one defining principle:  
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## *What are Letters on Liberty?*

It's not always easy to defend freedom. Public life may have been locked down recently, but it has been in bad health for some time.

Open debate has been suffocated by today's censorious climate and there is little cultural support for freedom as a foundational value. What we need is rowdy, good-natured disagreement and people prepared to experiment with what freedom might mean today.

We stand on the shoulders of giants, but we shouldn't be complacent. We can't simply rely on the thinkers of the past to work out what liberty means today, and how to argue for it.

Drawing on the tradition of radical pamphlets from the seventeenth century onwards - designed to be argued over in the pub as much as parliament - *Letters on Liberty* promises to make you think twice. Each *Letter* stakes a claim for how to forge a freer society in the here and now.

We hope that, armed with these *Letters*, you take on the challenge of fighting for liberty.

*Academy of Ideas team*



## WHY DEBATING MATTERS

*'Young men and their views are formed in the meeting and conflict of ideas. A conflict of ideas necessarily entails controversy and spirited discussion.'*<sup>xi</sup>

In November 2020, boys from Eton College reacted strongly to the decision by their school to sack their teacher after he refused to remove a controversial YouTube video of his lecture about patriarchy and masculinity.

In a letter to the provost calling for the teacher's reinstatement, the students reinforced their commitment to this 'conflict of ideas' and to 'spirited discussion' by asking:

*'How can the school reasonably expect teachers to engage in the promotion of free thought inside and outside of the schoolroom when the consequences of overstepping some poorly defined line of acceptability is to lose their livelihood and home?'*<sup>xii</sup>

The following spring, in March 2021, students from Batley Grammar School started a petition calling for the return of their teacher. He was suspended for having shown an image of Muhammad as part of a Religious Studies class intended to educate students

about racism and blasphemy. The petition reached 60,000 signatures in just three days.<sup>iii</sup>

Despite fears about the rise of ‘Generation Snowflake’, it seems the thirst for debate among some young people is still alive and well. This should hardly surprise us. That young, enquiring minds are keen to discuss big ideas - particularly as they relate to their own lives - is an important part not only of a liberal education, but in marking the transition from childhood to adulthood.

*We need to remake the argument that reasoned debate among autonomous individuals is fundamental to a free society.*

But what are we to make of the institutions and the adult figures of authority in the above examples who did not share their students’ commitment to open discussion and intellectual inquiry? And how do we liberate the power of debate from the increasing number of voices today - both young and old - who view free speech and spirited, no-holds-barred debate with suspicion, even hostility, as something promoted only by those with nefarious intentions?

This is the challenge set before those of us who believe that moral questions are not settled facts - that

all worthwhile concepts are open to contestation, interrogation and discussion. It is our job to free society from the dogma of received opinion and to push back against the misanthropic view that we have no business debating controversial ideas on the feeble basis that they may offend others. We need to remake the argument that reasoned debate among autonomous individuals is fundamental to a free society; and that we have a duty to the next generation of adults - the thinkers, decision-makers and citizens of the future - to arouse and cultivate the liberating power of debate.

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## **Debate, freedom and moral autonomy**

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There is no doubt the status of debate, both within educational settings and in wider society, is under fire. Relatively new concepts such as ‘safe spaces’ and ‘trigger warnings’ have entered the lexicon; debates on TV shows, social media, even in parliament, are increasingly viewed as fractious and unproductive. In a society riven with political polarisation and in the midst of an ever-present culture war, societal norms and values have been thrown into question. Evidence abounds that we are all finding discussion and debate increasingly fraught with difficulty. Even those of us who have long been advocates of free speech and

open debate find our social-media bubbles and echo chambers somewhat soothing.

There are, of course, those whose moral certainty is so assured that they are not concerned about the narrowing of debate. There are those who would happily shut down any dissenting opinion that could challenge their world view. There is nothing new in this sort of intellectual authoritarianism. History is littered with examples of how those with economic power and social prestige have censored or silenced debate.

*If we become morally dependent, we cease to be autonomous, free-thinking individuals.*

But, today, there is a newer and ever-growing phenomenon: a belief, particularly among the young, that exposure to contentious ideas and unpopular opinions are harmful to us - by which they usually mean, 'emotionally harmful'. The idea behind 'trigger warnings' is that the discussion of certain topics can trigger past trauma, and that vulnerable individuals should receive a warning to avoid reproducing the harm of the original emotional injury. Moreover, there is a growing body of opinion - particularly within the ideological framework of social justice - that 'words are violence'.<sup>iv</sup>



In her 2016 book, *I Find That Offensive*, Claire Fox charts a decades-long tendency towards ‘safetyism’ - a system of belief where ‘feeling safe’ has become a core value - which, she argues, has led to an ‘insidious deference to offence’.<sup>v</sup> Fox outlines contemporary offence-taking as it emerged from British and American universities as well as a range of therapeutic educational interventions that emphasise safety as ‘a virtue that trumps all else’.

These contemporary trends have led to a situation where there is an unwillingness to engage in the hard task of intellectually and morally tackling complex issues and a disinclination to consider ideas that make us feel uncomfortable - even for the purpose of refuting them. They have cultivated a sense of fragility and victimhood, and a habit of moral dependency.

While the basis on which morality rests has been the subject of debate for centuries - from Aristotle to Kant, JS Mill to AJ Ayer - what seems clear is that moral reasoning itself cannot be undertaken on another’s behalf. If we become morally dependent, we cease to be autonomous, free-thinking individuals. We may share ethical values, customs and norms passed down from generation to generation that bind us together as a society, but the task of moral reasoning, particularly as a subset of practical reasoning, is not something we can outsource to others.

Determining right from wrong in order to take decisions about how we ought to act, what we genuinely hold to be true or indeed how we want to live our lives, means we need to do the hard work of thinking and debating for ourselves. Without this, moral responsibility - upon which a democratic society and a functioning justice system rest - is rendered meaningless. Moreover, acting in accordance with our own conscience is what makes us moral beings. Being unable to do so can cause us to feel internally conflicted, inauthentic and downright unhappy.

*Rather than simply exposing young people to dangerous ideas, the process of debate rewards those whose arguments stand up to the test of scrutiny.*

But morality and moral judgement are not formed in a vacuum. Our views on a particular issue need testing, strengthening, refining and reforming. We can do this, to a large extent, by listening to and reading the opinions of others. But, in order to secure a rational basis for our opinions, we need to expose ourselves to debate and contestation. Discussion with others opens us up to new information and ideas, it allows us to consciously reflect upon our own arguments. This is the nub of independent thinking and critical reflection.

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## Debating and its discontents

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Independent thinking and critical reflection are still highly prized in education. Despite arguments from some educationalists that certain topics are off limits, they remain valued skills. And debating in schools is still a popular pursuit, although the framework within which it can be pursued may be narrowing.<sup>vi</sup>

Yet, there are challenges. It is more common now in the twenty-first century than it was in the one previous to hear the claim that certain topics are not up for debate, that certain ‘issues’ have been ‘settled’. Yet we know from our experience of contemporary discourse that questions over racial and sexual politics have been reframed; immigration and abortion remain contentious topics and Enlightenment concepts have been redefined. Equity is often favoured over equality, and the mantra of ‘zero tolerance’ has supplanted tolerance in some quarters. As each generation matures to consider and tackle these important ideas, we must engage and remake our arguments anew.

There are also concerns that the easy availability of information, particularly online, means that children may come across unsavoury views often labelled ‘misinformation’ and falsehoods.<sup>vii</sup> There is a fear within society that young people are unable to

differentiate between good and bad sources of information during independent research. Yet this is precisely why debate is so important. Rather than simply exposing young people to dangerous ideas, the process of debate rewards those whose arguments stand up to the test of scrutiny and challenge - it rewards those who can differentiate between good and bad arguments, and encourages others to do the same.

There are those who regard formal debating as a purely academic exercise, more suited to private schools than the state sector. They argue that debates themselves are too abstract and have little to do with the 'lived experience' or real challenges facing young people from less privileged backgrounds.<sup>viii</sup> It is a culture of low expectation that regards state-school pupils as less articulate, less resilient, less able to adopt the combination of abstract and concrete thinking required not only for formal debates, but in navigating everyday life.

In his 2021 book, *Conflicted*, author Ian Leslie outlines some misgivings about formal debating:

*I spent time reading about the principles of good intellectual debate as established and refined by thinkers over thousands of years, from the ancient philosophers onwards. Principles like "assume good faith", "get to know your opponent's argument as well as your own", "don't argue with straw*

*men". It was wise and enlightening stuff, but something nagged away at me... it seemed much easier to know what you ought to do in disagreement than to do it... I came to think of productive disagreement not as a philosophy so much a discipline.*<sup>ix</sup>

Leslie is correct. Debating is a skill that needs to be practised. He notes that people are not logic machines:

*'We are egotistical, proud, impulsive, insecure and needy. Rather than being a pure exchange of opinions and evidence, an argument is nearly always entangled with how we feel about each other.'*

This is especially true when we are young, as we are morally, emotionally and intellectually maturing. Our reasoning capacity needs to develop - young people need the opportunity to expand these skills through internal modes of reflection and external modes of critique. It is precisely through the principles of good debate, 'established and refined by thinkers over thousands of years', that young people are provided with a safe framework to explore ideas - even bad ones.

## Debating Matters

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A good debate format - like the one we have developed at Debating Matters (DM) - supports critical thinking in several important ways.<sup>x</sup> Now in its twentieth year, we have developed a format that has been adopted in schools across the UK, Germany, India and Israel, where elements have been included within the national curriculum. Each participating pupil is required to research and understand both sides of the argument. Topic guides are provided for each DM debate, which outline a range of opinions for and against the motion.<sup>xi</sup> This means that, at some point, pupils are exposed to an opinion or argument they personally disagree with.

It is this ability to analyse and criticise their own beliefs that forms a core component in the skill of critical reflection, and leads to independent thought. Pupils must sift through the range of views they are presented with, make decisions about their relevance and validity, and pick those most suited to defending their position.

At DM, pupils are encouraged to do their own research. The topics for debate are never shallow, there is always nuance, subtlety and thoughts on both sides. We encourage young people to see that different

arguments are more relevant and valid in different contexts. Consciously reflecting on these nuances is at the heart of developing moral autonomy. The topics selected are not based on hypothetical or abstract questions, but on debates that are happening in society. Motions such as ‘tech companies should act to stop online misinformation’ and ‘monuments to controversial figures should remain’ situate the debates firmly in the real world.

Although each topic has a philosophical dilemma at its heart, the fact that these are genuine societal debates encourages young people to see that they matter. Moreover, how we arrive at collective decisions in a democratic society should be through a process of inquiry, reflection and debate. Our format takes young people and their ideas seriously.

*Over the past 20 years, we have discovered that pupils rise to the challenge, expressing enthusiasm about adults taking them seriously enough to provide honest appraisal.*

An important element in a DM competition is the inclusion of a judging panel. Three ‘judges’ - drawn from wider society, from the worlds of business, journalism, academia and other walks of public life -

are encouraged through a Q&A process to push pupils to develop and refine their arguments further. They are asked to judge on the content of each argument, rather than the style; to reward well-researched arguments over the ability to perform rhetorical devices. By considering the judges' feedback, pupils learn which arguments have been most successful and which pitfalls to avoid. *Ad hominem* and 'straw man' arguments are revealed as less effective than engaging with the content of the most persuasive element of an opponent's position. Relying on unsupported opinion or, conversely, a plethora of statistics without argumentation to back them up, is exposed as a weak debating technique.

When DM introduced the judging process, there were some in the educational world who suggested that, in asking judges to be frank in their criticism, pupils' self-esteem would be damaged. These critics suggested that pupils would be unable to take on board negative comments.

On the contrary, over the past 20 years we have discovered that pupils rise to this challenge, expressing enthusiasm about adults taking them seriously enough to provide honest appraisal. Too often, contemporary adult society tends to condescend to the young, offering only positive affirmation, without realising



that constructive criticism helps them to develop. As a teacher from Oldham Grammar School told us:

*'The respectful approach taken by the chairs, the high-quality insights and questioning from the judges and a format which really does allow pupils to develop nuanced arguments and hone skills which cannot otherwise be taught in the classroom, ensure that even in its twentieth year, Debating Matters remains fresh, relevant and undoubtedly one of the very best extracurricular opportunities offered to sixth-form students.'*

Finally, the competitive element of debate - that feeling there's something at stake - adds to the process of encouraging independence of thought. Perhaps more importantly, it is fun. Young people learn that wrestling with difficult ideas is rewarding in and of itself. Debating ideas involves reflecting upon something outside yourself. You are part of something bigger. When you debate, you are connected to others and their thoughts. You are truly engaging in society - it's about other people, other viewpoints and making sense of your place in the world.

As Jeremy S Adams, author of *Hollowed Out*, notes, intellectual development is an activity that requires interaction with others:

*'Adulthood is a summit of physical, moral and intellectual growth that, of necessity, comes from activity and interaction,*

*from lessons learnt, commitments accepted, and duties performed... We need to remind young people - and maybe ourselves - that reaching that summit is worth the effort.'*<sup>xii</sup>

Adams highlights the fact that we acquire dignity, resilience and self-esteem through dealing with the problems that confront society, rather than outsourcing our moral faculties to others - whether that's politicians, thought leaders, university administrators or the language police.

The freedom to debate is the freedom to develop your own moral conscience. Rather than shying away from controversial or difficult topics, we should embrace them and encourage young people to do the same. In *Conflicted*, Leslie draws out a myriad of ways in which conflict and disagreement helps us to navigate both personal relationships and the challenges in wider society. Rather than disagreement being bad for us, the ability to handle smaller conflicts equips us to deal with the larger problems we face.

JS Mill - one of the founding fathers of liberal thought - made the important point that if we don't debate ideas, if we allow them to be censored instead, then they become 'dead dogma'. They cease to be organic, alive and relevant; in short, they stop being worth thinking about. Moreover, in *On Liberty*, he highlights what he calls:

*'The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion... If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.'* <sup>xiii</sup>

Today there is a creeping tendency towards undermining many Enlightenment values such as liberty, tolerance and moral equality. We need the courage to assert that, as adults, we do not need protecting from challenging ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions. We must also defend the idea that children should cultivate the cognitive muscles required for dealing with the complex challenges of the adult world. We need to reject the idea that any moral and political question has become a settled fact, and that successive generations can forgo the process of democratic persuasion, discussion and the chance to consider and freely debate ideas for themselves.

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Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Debating Matters Competition, which emphasises debaters' knowledge and clear thinking over points of order and rhetorical flourishes. By debating real-world issues, students are introduced to key controversies at the top of the public agenda. Using the acclaimed Debating Matters Topic Guides, the competition challenges people to go beyond the media headlines and delve deeper into the biggest issues confronting society.

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