THANK-OFFERING TO BRITAIN FUND LECTURE

THE ACADEMIC PROFESSION By ERIC ASHBY

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IN 1964 I was present at the centenary celebrations of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. One of the events was a seminar attended by a score of distinguished scientists. At one point in the seminar, after two European-born, but now American, Nobel prize-winners had spoken, someone said: 'You notice that the international language of science is English with a foreign accent.'

This remark expresses vividly what English-speaking countries owe to some of the European intellectuals—not only scientists, of course—who were obliged by the storms of history to leave their homelands. The Thank-Offering to Britain Fund, which this lecture commemorates, is the expression of their debt to us. But we, too, are in debt to them, and I am glad of this opportunity to pay tribute to the contribution they have made to the intellectual life of Britain.

Given the origin of this endowment, it is proper that the lecturer should reflect on the idea of freedom. To the first of these lectures Lord Robbins gave the title Of Academic Freedom. He was concerned largely with the corporate freedom of universities, i.e. their autonomy, rather than with the academic freedom of individuals. In this lecture I am concerned with the way university teachers use academic freedom in its narrow personal sense—the sense that is embodied in the word Lehrfreiheit. But first it is necessary to draw a distinction between the corporate freedom of a university and the academic freedom of teachers in a university. For there is a distinction; the concepts are not synonymous. Indeed, a fully autonomous university can nevertheless challenge the academic freedom of its members, as Oxford did, when it hauled Jowett before the Vice-Chancellor's Court in 1863; and a university which is not autonomous can nevertheless safeguard the academic freedom of its members, as Prussian universities did in Humboldt's time. My theme is to reflect on the use made of the personal freedoms within the university which academics expect and which—in Britain and many other countries—they certainly receive.

It is of course a right of all citizens in this country to say,

teach, and publish what they think, subject only to limitations set by the law of the land. Academic freedom does not exceed this right; but it does exempt academics from constraints upon this right, such as are imposed by many other professions; indeed it empowers a university teacher to carry this right into the actual discharge of his contract with the institution he serves. Within the easy constraints set by a faculty board or the head of a department (and even these constraints are arguable) he fulfils his contract by devising his own teaching programme and choosing his own research projects; and outside his contract he can promulgate his views whether or not they lie within his expertise—without endangering his job. He can, with impunity, upset the theories of his professor by his research, and embarrass the vice-chancellor by his letters to *The Times*. This is a greater degree of freedom than is allowed to men belonging to some other institutions, such as the Civil Service, the army, or the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church. How is it that the academic profession has acquired these privileges?

The privileges have their origin in history and their support in the style of nineteenth-century English society (and it is one of our contemporary problems that this style has changed). The colleges of Oxford and Cambridge were wealthy enough to preserve a great deal of freedom from the State and—in their more vigorous phases—even from the Church. They used this freedom to preserve the medieval concept of the university as a guild of masters, each master (in the modern jargon of the left) 'doing his own thing'. And the style of nineteenth-century English society was to leave higher education to private enterprise, to respect the autonomy of private corporations, to recognize that the profession of teaching was best pursued with a minimum of restraint from Church or State.

I say 'profession', but compared with the professions of medicine, law, and the Church, the academic profession is—in modern times—a comparative newcomer. Census analyses in the nineteenth century, and indeed up to 1911, distinguished a score of professions, which included actors, midwives, and surveyors, but which lumped the academic profession into the category of 'teachers'. It seems at first strange that a profession which even a century ago was making claims on the indulgence of society for special freedoms should have had so little identity; but the reason is, I think, simple. In the early nineteenth century, before the rise of the civic universities, the only prestigious

teaching posts in England were in Oxford and Cambridge; and in these two universities practically all the teaching was done by colleges. Up to about ninety years ago the colleges required their Fellows to be celibate. Therefore, except for the chronic bachelor, a Fellowship was not a first step on the academic ladder; it was an interlude which had to lead, on marriage, to some other profession: a church living or a post in a public school. It was one of the grievances laid before the Royal Commissioners on Cambridge in 1852 that college teaching was 'only a temporary employment during a few years of early life, and not a definite and acknowledged career'. In England (though not in Scotland), even for professors a chair was not a career post. No less a person than Maine, in giving evidence before the Cambridge Commissioners on his own Chair of Civil Law, said:

it is virtually impossible that any Professor should make the conduct and regulation of his Faculty the principal occupation of his life. I myself am a practising barrister—my two immediate predecessors were beneficed clergymen.

And the Professor of Botany in Cambridge was unable to suggest any improvements in the duties of his Chair, 'consistent with my duties to my parish'. In the Oxford of 1852 it was no better; the Royal Commission there wrote of the desirability of a university professorship becoming 'a recognised profession'. In short, the chronic weakness of the academic profession at that time was a divided loyalty; and it is part of my theme that, in another form, this divided loyalty has now returned.

If academic freedom was not often questioned in nineteenth-century England, it was because no one cared much what professors taught or wrote; it was a freedom which did not matter. And the concomitants of academic freedom—security in the profession and control of its standards—were correspondingly ill defined outside the ancient universities. For example, at Manchester until 1870 professors were frankly employees of the Board of Trustees, although (in deference to the traditions in Oxford and Cambridge) the Trustees delegated academic business to the Principal and the professors. But academic freedom was not always granted so liberally: it is on record that professors in some new universities, for example Sonnenschein in Birmingham, had to fight for control of academic business. As recently as 1910, when the Haldane Commission was reviewing the constitution of the University of London, the Vice-Chancellor at that

time said in his evidence that he 'hoped the Commission would pronounce in favour of teachers being represented on the Governing Body' of schools of the University; and he salted his plea with the anecdote that on one occasion, at a meeting of the Council of University College, before it included any academic representatives, he heard one member of the Council say to another: 'When a professor walks into the Council Room, I shall walk out.'

But the lack of identity and cohesion in the academic profession has, I believe, deeper causes than divided loyalty. There has been, and still is, an uncertainty about the uses of academic freedom. Perhaps the cause of this uncertainty is that in this country the fight for the concomitants of academic freedom—security of tenure and control of standards—was won half a century ago; but the uses to which academic freedom should be put have not been defined. I think that in the future this freedom may be challenged; therefore it is worth while to examine how it has been used over the last century, how it is being used today, and how it ought to be used tomorrow.

There is, of course, one clear use of academic freedom which has not changed over the last century, namely the practice of publishing new ideas and new discoveries, not only without fear that they will be suppressed because they challenge orthodoxy, but also with the assurance that if the ideas and discoveries stand up to criticism, they will in fact become the new orthodoxy and will displace the old. In the world of research there is no class hierarchy; pundits have no permanent standing; the whole fabric of learning is held together by a consensus of what constitutes sound scholarship. In this respect the academic profession does seem to have established unwritten, supranational, professional standards, which are independent of nationality, race, politics, and religion.

But research and scholarship are not the only duties expected of the academic profession. Indeed as duties they are comparatively recent. Even in Scotland, which had a well-established professoriate, it was asserted, in evidence before the Royal Commission of 1876, that 'the Scotch professor does not yet consider research to be one of his duties'; and Haldane, in another Royal Commission a generation later, was still having to emphasize that research was part of a professor's duty. This duty, however, should not obscure the fact that the primary responsibility of a profession of university teachers is to teach in universities. And it is in the use of academic freedom in the

discharge of this responsibility that one finds, over the last hundred years, a certain ambivalence.

To suggest to university teachers that university teaching is their prime responsibility is to stir a curious resentment among some of them. So let me assert at once that the academic profession in Britain is probably more dedicated to teaching, and more successful in its dedication, than are academics in universities anywhere else. Our students do receive personal attention from senior professors; care is paid to their individual needs; anxious thought is devoted to admitting, teaching, and examining them (to say nothing of the writing of scores of references afterwards); all this to a degree which I believe is not equalled in America or Russia or on the continent of Europe. And, as one by-product of this, British universities have the lowest 'drop-out' rate of any in the world.

But, granted all this, there is a curious gap in the attitude of the profession to that part of its duty which concerns teaching. The profession neither demands nor provides for any training or internship for the activity which is its prime responsibility; and it has no explicit code of conduct towards those whom it serves—its students—as the doctor has to his patient, the lawyer to his client, the banker to his customer. There is a consequence to this, namely that different members of the profession regard this part of their responsibility in very diverse ways. Academic freedom permits this diversity. Diversity is practically always to be preferred to uniformity. But the drawback of this diversity is, I maintain, a lack of 'cohesion-of-intent' in the academic profession, such as is not found among, for example, medical practitioners or barristers.

In Britain, up to the First World War, the paradigm of a university teacher—at any rate in the humanities—was not the research-centred German professor: it was the reformed Oxbridge college don; his aim (as Mark Pattison put it) to produce 'not a book but a man'. The curriculum—classics, or history, or philosophy—was taught rigorously and to a very high standard. But these subjects were commonly regarded as tools to sharpen the mind, rather than as ends in themselves. This was one expression of the use of academic freedom in teaching the young. The freedom was used to fashion a man in a certain tradition, to tailor him to a certain style of intellectual life, even to persuade him to adopt a certain pattern of conformity. In recent years the emphasis has changed. Herbert Butterfield put it vividly when he said recently that, in his young days,

when the Faculty Board of History at Cambridge discussed questions of syllabus, the Board members spoke in their capacity as supervisors, interested in the whole intellectual development of the young men in their charge. Nowadays, he went on to say, 'when we are discussing the syllabus, I believe we tend to speak rather as University Lecturers, each of us a little more concerned to look after the fortunes of his own branch of the study'. From the United States a similar contrast can be drawn. In 1915 the American Association of University Professors published a Declaration of Principles which included the sentence: 'It is not only the character of the instruction but also the character of the instructor that counts; and if the student has reason to believe that the instructor is not true to himself, the virtue of the instruction as an educative force is incalculably diminished.' When, in 1966, the Association issued a Statement on Professional Ethics, the emphasis on 'the character of the instructor' had vanished.

I am not concerned to criticize this attitude; I mention it to illustrate that over the last fifty years there has been an unplanned change in the intent of the academic profession towards its teaching duties: many academics use academic freedom in their teaching differently from the way their predecessors used it two generations ago. Whether this change has itself caused the change in student attitudes to academic work, or whether it has been caused by the changed attitude of students, is an interesting question which I cannot pursue here.

In American universities this preoccupation with the subject rather than with the student has been carried to such extremes that there is genuine and justified alarm about 'the flight from teaching'. There are universities in America which attract star professors by assuring them that they need not be on the campus for more than one year in three. The flight from teaching is not due to laziness—these jet-set professors work very hard; it is due to the extraneous calls to which the successful academic is now expected to respond: university boards, editing a learned journal, the mail, most of it not concerned with the university's work at all, invitations to sit on government committees or on the council of a professional society. The temptations are there, and academic freedom strips the teacher of protection against them. This has led one American professor (Jacques Barzun) to assert that some modern academics in America ('scholars in orbit' he calls them) now redefine academic freedom as the freedom to choose what they shall do and when, and to withhold any service they please.

In Britain it would be untrue to say that there has been a flight from teaching. There is abundant evidence to the contrary. And the slick complaint—that the duties of teaching and research are irreconcilable—is belied by the achievements of thousands of university teachers in Britain. But these are not grounds for complacency. For there are straws in the wind, and the direction of the wind is not reassuring. Let me support this assertion by an illustration.

There is no doubt that the academic profession has again become a profession of divided loyalties; not, of course, for the reasons which made it so in the nineteenth century, but because the academic finds that the claims of the guild of university teachers, demanding loyalty to the university he serves and the pupils under his care, can easily be overshadowed by the claims of a second guild to which he belongs: that of his peers in his specialism. Ask yourselves which judgement matters most to a young physicist: the judgement of the Vice-Chancellor and Senate and students of his own university, or the judgement of physicists in the Royal Society and on the committees which distribute grants from the Science Research Council? It is true that there is a broad overlap in the criteria for earning golden opinions from both of these sources; but it is not true that the criteria are identical. And there is a temptation, on the lower steps of the academic ladder, to allocate less time than one would like to the art of teaching and to leisurely talking with undergraduates, and more time to what is ironically described as 'my own work'. If 'my own work' were always directly relevant to the teaching which has to be done, there would still be no clash between the two activities. But we have to face the fact that the motive to do research is not always due to the need to improve the quality of one's teaching; nor is it always due to an irrepressible desire to discover new facts or ideas: sometimes, in science at any rate, the motive is little more than the need to publish papers in order to secure recognition and promotion. (If anyone in this audience is whispering to himself that publishing papers is not the main criterion for recognition and promotion, let me support my assertion by saying that I have for thirty years sat on appointments committees in four different universities, and I can produce plenty of evidence to defend what I say.) This pressure to publish is not new, but it is more noticeable nowadays because of the age-structure in the profession. In a stable profession there is an even spread of age, from early twenties to early sixties. But universities which have expanded quickly find that they

have about five times as many teachers in the 30-35 age-group as are in the 50-55 age-group. It is on these young academics that the pressure operates.

At the top of the academic ladder a new challenge to loyalty appears: the call to professors to serve on the committees of research councils, learned societies, and government departments. This claim upon their time is necessary and important for the whole academic world. If the University Grants Committee and the research councils and their committees were not manned by men like these, the autonomy of learning and even academic freedom itself would be endangered. They are the insulation between the scholar and the state. But these activities do contribute to a division of loyalties in the academic profession.

Research and service on committees are unpaid; but there is a third temptation to the use of academic freedom, namely, the paid consultancy. The present-day academic, in some subjects, finds that he has a highly marketable skill. The tradition of academic freedom permits him to put his skill on the market, notwithstanding the fact that he has a full-time job as a university teacher. Sometimes he is right to do so, but the profession provides no criteria by which he can judge whether or not he is right.

So it is a dilemma. On the one hand universities are faced with a massive increase in student numbers, and the obligation to teach will not diminish: it will increase. On the other hand there is evidence that emphasis on the prime responsibility of the academic profession is shifting from being student-centred (though this remains, in Britain, an important element) to being subject-centred, or (for some senior members of the profession) to serving as a scholar-statesman. We have to face the fact that the pace of advancement of knowledge has made research in many fields competitive instead of contemplative, and, for some scholars, this has distorted the purpose of research. Furthermore, the need for scholar-statesmen makes it essential that some scholars, at any rate, should devote some of their time to committees and to advising governments. The problem cannot be solved simply by directives to academics on how to divide their time among these competing demands. It is part of academic freedom that they have to make this choice themselves. The choice therefore becomes a problem in how to use academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors clearly recognizes this, for its Statement on Professional Ethics (1966) includes the sentence: '[The professor] determines the amount and character of the work he does outside his institution with due regard to his paramount interests within it.' But the *Statement* offers no guidance on how 'due regard' is to be measured.

It is in this context that we have to consider the recent and notorious report of the National Board for Prices and Incomes on salaries of university teachers. Let me say at once that in my view the report was crude, naïve, and constituted a lapse of diplomacy in the relations between a government agency and universities. This is a pity, because it provoked, from some vociferous university teachers, a querulous outburst, equally crude and naïve, which did little credit to the profession. Because of this, the intention of the report, which was serious and timely, was not appreciated. For the report tried, in a clumsy and tactless way, to establish two things: first, to define the academic profession and its distinction from other professions, and second, to specify the purpose of the profession and the balance to be expected from its practitioners between teaching, research, and extra-mural activities.

These intentions were important and timely, but they failed. It is not my purpose here to analyse the failure. Suffice it to say that first, the report perpetuated differential salary scales between university teachers in medicine and other university teachers (instead of recommending some pattern of dual university and hospital appointments with separate sources of salary), and this severely damaged the concept that university teaching is a distinguishable profession with its own scales of pecuniary rewards, where emolument is based on distinction within the profession (whether in medicine or Sanskrit), not on competition from another, quite different, profession. Second, the report, while very properly advocating that a profession of university teachers should offer inducements for good teaching, destroys its own advocacy by the assumption that the ideas of productivity can be applied to the art of teaching. University teachers create in their pupils, as artists do on their canvas and poets with their pens, qualities which cannot be properly evaluated until years afterwards, and which vary from masterpieces (think of the pupils of Rutherford and Namier) to mediocrity. The concepts of productivity, disengaged from quality, are simply irrelevant to these operations. Apply the concepts of cost-effectiveness by all means to buildings, administration, catering, residence, and even to a rationalization of which universities should teach which subjects; but, applied to

the art of teaching and the production of graduates, the concept is nonsense. It is the new trahison des clercs: to imagine that a university should be satisfied simply to achieve the most efficient movement in some planned direction. On the contrary, its object is to scrutinize all the time the appropriateness of the direction planned. It is an activity which cannot be evaluated by cost-accountants. This is valid for teaching even more than it is for research, because teaching is inevitably manipulating the lives of others. The N.B.P.I.'s statement:

... we consider how best the levels and structure of university salaries should be altered with a view to promoting lower costs per student at a difficult moment for the economy

will go down in history as one of the more philistine remarks made by a British government agency; the most stupid way to lower costs would be to relate the salary structure of the profession to the output of graduates, without regard to the quality of the output.

But this is a digression. My theme is the uses of academic freedom, and I digressed in order to say that the Board tried to clarify these uses, and failed. But we do well not to disregard its reminder that the prime responsibility of a university teacher is. . . I almost said 'to teach'; but let me put it another way. It is to diminish ignorance, both his own ignorance and that of his pupils. Diminishing the ignorance of one's pupils is an art, improved by training; and it is a different training from that needed for diminishing one's own ignorance. University teachers are very well trained to diminish their own ignorance, and they set great store by this training. It is surely an indictment of the profession that its members do not require from themselves any training or internship in the art of diminishing the ignorance of their pupils.

But we have not done with the argument yet. Diminish the ignorance of one's pupils: but in which areas? Here we encounter what is, in my view, the most perplexing problem in the uses of academic freedom. Of course, the prime duty of a university teacher is to diminish ignorance in the area of his own specialism: biophysics, Tudor history, medieval French. But, traditionally, university teaching has meant much more than that. Indeed, in the minds of many academics, it still does. When, two or three years ago, groups of university teachers submitted memoranda for visitations by the University Grants Committee, these statements were among their memoranda:

from one university:

We feel very strongly that the university should contribute to the development of its students in much more than a strictly subject- or profession-oriented way...

and from another:

We favour an increase in numbers of halls of residence 'where tutorial care and the education of the whole man are held to be essential features'.

This, in the context of my lecture, is a claim to include more than academic instruction in the duties of a university teacher. It is a claim to use academic freedom for pastoral as well as for narrowly professional purposes; indeed, to include a moral content in university education. If there is to be a code of conduct in the academic profession towards those whom it serves, analogous to the codes in other professions, university teachers need to decide where they stand on this question.

Some university teachers are already sure where they stand. A university, they say, is not an institution for moral training. It is not even a place dedicated to wisdom, only to knowledge. A university will (as Moberly wrote a generation ago) teach students how to make bombs or cathedrals, but it will not teach them which of these objects they ought to make. The typical nineteenth-century don believed that what he taught should be not only accurate but edifying; today some of his successors believe that all that is required of their teaching is disinterested accuracy. The only rules these teachers would enforce on the academic community are those essential to preserve it as a place of learning and research. Over the social implications of knowledge, even more over manners, ethics, and style of life, they adopt a policy of non-intervention.

Academic freedom permits the university teacher to adopt this attitude, and there are arguments in its favour: it keeps the university out of politics and helps to preserve its autonomy. But to take this attitude is to withdraw from a responsibility which has been traditionally accepted by dons in Britain. If it were to become the accepted code of conduct in the academic profession it could reduce the teacher—student relationship to one in which the teacher was simply selling knowledge and technique—a relationship which might become as impersonal as the relationship between a customer and his grocer. And, paradoxically, this impersonal relationship is something which students themselves would reject—indeed, have rejected.

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This paradox is relevant to my theme. When you separate out the motives behind student unrest, putting aside the shrill cult of nihilism, the doctrinaire demands for 'student power', which assume falsely that a university is a mini-state and not a guild of masters and apprentices, the hypocrisy (for hypocrisy is no monopoly of my generation) which claims the rights but rejects the responsibilities of studentship, and the mere mischiefmaking of 'protest-for-kicks'; when you put all these aside, you discover among some thoughtful students one motive which we do well to respect: a demand that there should be a moral value in higher education. But it is a paradoxical demand, as though the student were repeating Mark Pattison's formula: 'Not a book but a man', and adding: 'but not a man like you'. Among the graffiti written on the walls of the university at Nanterre last year was a cynical adaptation of Descartes; it read: 'They think: therefore I am.' This expresses a confession and resentment that university teachers do influence their pupils. Some pupils resist having to accept from their teachers a style of life and a set of assumptions and value-judgements about society, as a package deal thrown in with their academic work. They fear that they will imbibe from the professor of chemistry not only chemistry, but also what they regard as his compromise with a corrupt world which prostitutes science. And yet-and this is the paradox—these same pupils are asking their teachers to reconcile, somehow, the intellectual detachment essential for good scholarship with the social concern essential for the good life; to establish, as Northrop Frye put it, 'the human context into which knowledge fits. . . . What we have to determine is to what extent concern is a scholarly virtue, and whether or not it is, like detachment, a precondition of knowledge'. A recently published pamphlet, aptly called a 'Black Paper', put out by earnest men who are alarmed by what they call a 'progressive collapse' in British education, sneers at the student demonstrators in one of the new universities, who said that they wished to be taught 'life' instead of literature, history, or science. But perhaps these students are saying, with the ignorance and brashness and arrogance of youth, that they want university education to have a moral value. And did not Jowett and Sedgwick and Seeley, and other great teachers, do just what the students ask: teach, using as tools classics and geology and history, the art of living. When students ask for what they call relevance we have to criticize and sometimes reject their demands, for by relevance many of them mean a sort of intellectual parochialism, a concentration on topics and not on disciplines. But when they ask for guidance in how to relate their studies to their own moral and social value-judgements, they are asking for something which they will need in any career or profession. A score of times this year I have been asked by students: 'What am I being taught English or engineering for?' Most students, still, can answer this question for themselves. But some genuinely want guidance. Can it be given without dogma and without hypocrisy? I believe it can, not by indoctrinating students with a repertoire of moral principles—that way danger lies—but by asserting that the discipline of scholarship carries its own ethical values: reverence for truth, with the recognition, which generates humility, that all truth may be contaminated by error; equality, for any scholar, however junior, who advances knowledge has his place in the guild of learning; internationalism, for it is immaterial whether a scholar's theory is upset by one of his countrymen or by an enemy, by a black man or a yellow man, by a Christian or a Muslim—the theory is upset all the same. Moral authority in universities, therefore, can be an authority which avoids dogma and which lays down the pragmatic conditions under which scholarship can be pursued. And what is valid for scholarship is valid for all rational decision-making. Arrogance, insincerity, prejudice, intolerance, failure to ascertain the facts: these are incompatible with intellectual health, whether in research, or politics, or commerce.

So-and now I conclude—I believe that there is a need for the academic profession to define its complex loyalties more clearly; and the definition, which already covers adequately the duty of the university teacher towards his subject, should also clarify the duty of the university teacher towards his pupils. The arguable question is whether this duty includes the teaching of concern as well as detachment. I think it does. The protesting student who is worth listening to is the one who wants the academic profession to offer a pattern of leadership, authority, and example which he can accept. In its standards of scholarship, in the expertise of its practitioners, the profession does this already. We have to be uncompromising about the virtues of detachment in scholarship. We have to insist that issues must be resolved by reason and persuasion, not by disruption or force. We must have no patience with those who choose to come to universities, and yet who profess to despise the intellectual approach, who reject objectivity and discipline, and who replace

these qualities by surges of vague emotional commitment. But more than this is required of us. We must reassure the young that intellectual detachment is not inconsistent with social concern. For it is social concern which unites large numbers of students—many more than those who demonstrate—with the rest of their generation. They will not break this tie. If these students do not learn from their teachers that the academic tradition can coexist with concern for society, they will reject the academic tradition. The threat to the present generation comes not so much from us but from themselves, for some of the protesting young reject experience. Experience, in their view, spells compromise with the powers of evil. They are, therefore, rejecting what they themselves will become in ten years' time. I think it is a duty of university teachers to save them from this tragic misjudgement. It will not be easy, for the world is changing so fast that, for the first time in history I suppose, it is arguable whether experience can keep pace with the need for adaptation.

But we, who belong to the academic profession, should (in my view) regard the solution to this problem as our duty. For what really unites members of the academic profession is not an interest in one another's scholarship; it is our common participation in the mechanism of intellectual heredity: we are the analogues of chromosomes in physical heredity. Our duty is to perpetuate the stability of tradition coupled with the potential for changing tradition; to transmit a corpus of orthodoxy coupled with a technique for constructive dissent from orthodoxy. This is a prime use of academic freedom.