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Notable & Quotable: The Milton Friedman Prize

‘We need a noninstrumental or nonutilitarian argument for free speech. Freedom of speech is a good in and of itself. It has intrinsic value.’

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From remarks by Danish journalist Flemming Rose upon receiving the Cato Institute’s Milton Friedman Prize for Advancing Liberty, in New York City, May 25:

We easily get into trouble if our defense of free speech is premised on whether it contributes to truth-seeking or not, or whether it serves democracy or not, whether it is blasphemous or not, whether it offends or not, whether it undermines the war effort or not or, whether it is a threat to the common good or not—all these arguments are used every day to silence people all around the world.

They are all instrumental or utilitarian arguments. They claim that we need free speech to achieve something else that is more important than free speech. If our speech contradicts these goals of higher value, democracy, theocracy, communism, dignity understood as the right not to be offended, the historical truth, religious sensibilities, the need to eradicate hate and so on and so forth—then it is perfectly OK to criminalize that kind of speech.

This is the fundamental nature of the “I am in favor of free speech, but” position.

Thus we need a noninstrumental or nonutilitarian argument for free speech. Freedom of speech is a good in and of itself. It has intrinsic value.

Viewing free speech as an individual right rather than a mechanism to achieve a goal will lead to the conclusion that there are too many restraints on this liberty, while the “I am in favor of free speech, but” point of view always will be able to justify further limitations on speech.

The argument from autonomy means that human beings are morally self-governing individuals that are able to make up their mind about the speech of other people and decide how to respond. No politician or public opinion should have the power through criminalization and bans to hide opinions and speech from us, implying that we are not able to handle it in a reasonable and responsible way. It takes away our dignity because it is based on the assumption that we cannot be trusted to listen to certain kinds of speech. As Lincoln assumed in another context, free men should not be free to choose unfreedom for others. This is where the arguments from autonomy and dignity are grounded and where they come together in a sustainable and enduring defense for free speech.