



English III

Week 2

English III, Week 2

Questioning the Text

Week 2: Activity 1.5 Questioning the Text

Task 1: Page 33 (5 minutes)

- Read “Preview” in blue at the top of the page.
- Read “Introducing the Strategy” and the three levels of questions.
- Complete Question 1.

Task 2: Pages 33-38 (25-35 minutes)

- Read “As You Read” at the bottom of page 33.
- Read “The Two Clashing Meanings of ‘Free Speech’” from page 34 to page 38.
- Complete “Making Observations” on page 38.

Task 3: Pages 39 and 40 (30-45 minutes)

- Answer questions 2-8 in “Returning to the Text.”

Task 4: Page 40 (15 minutes)

- Complete “Check Your Understanding”

My Notes

About the Author

Teresa M. Bejan (b. 1984) received her PhD in political philosophy from Yale University in 2013 and is an associate professor of political theory at Oxford University in England. Her writing focuses on present-day issues while drawing upon the work of Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes. Her essay “The Two Clashing Meanings of ‘Free Speech’” appeared in *The Atlantic* on December 2, 2017.



Essay

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*.

by Teresa M. Bejan

1 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.

2 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.

3 When it comes to private universities, businesses, or social media, the would-be censors are our fellow-citizens, not the state. Private entities like Facebook or Twitter, not to mention Yale or Middlebury, have broad rights to

permissiveness: tolerance
marginalized: those kept in a powerless position within society

regulate and exclude the speech of their members. Likewise, online mobs are made up of outraged individuals exercising their own right to speak freely. To invoke the First Amendment in such cases is not a knock-down argument, it's a non sequitur.

4 John Stuart Mill argued that the chief threat to free speech in democracies was not the state, but the “social tyranny” of one’s fellow citizens. And yet today, the civil libertarians who style themselves as Mill’s inheritors have for the most part failed to refute, or even address, the arguments about free speech and equality that their opponents are making.

5 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.

6 Of the two ancient concepts of free speech, *isegoria* is the older. The term dates back to the fifth century BCE, 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.

7 In the democracy of Athens, this idea of addressing an informal gathering in the *agora* carried over into the more formal setting of the *ekklesia* or political assembly. The herald would ask, “Who will address the assemblymen?” and then the volunteer would ascend the *bema*, or speaker’s platform. In theory, *isegoria* meant that any Athenian citizen in good standing had the right to participate in debate and try to persuade his fellow citizens. In practice, the number of participants was fairly small, limited to the practiced rhetoricians and elder statesmen seated near the front. (Disqualifying offenses included prostitution and taking bribes.)

8 Although Athens was not the only democracy in the ancient world, from the beginning the Athenian principle of *isegoria* was seen as something special. The historian Herodotus even described the form of government at Athens not as *demokratia*, but as *isegoria* itself. According to the fourth-century orator and patriot Demosthenes, the Athenian constitution was based on speeches (*politeia en logois*) and its citizens had chosen *isegoria* as a way of life. But for its critics, this was a bug, as well as a feature. One critic, the so-called ‘Old Oligarch,’ complained that even slaves and foreigners enjoyed *isegoria* at Athens, hence one could not beat them as one might elsewhere.



Harvard University students chant slogans as they protest a scheduled speaking appearance of author Charles Murray on the campus of Harvard University, Wednesday, Sept. 6, 2017, in Cambridge, Mass. Murray, who co-wrote a book discussing racial differences in intelligence, touched off a boisterous protest earlier in 2017 at Vermont’s Middlebury College.

My Notes

My Notes

9 Critics like the Old Oligarch may have been exaggerating for comic effect, but they also had a point: as its etymology suggests, *isegoria* was fundamentally about equality, not freedom. As such, it would become the hallmark of Athenian democracy, which distinguished itself from the other Greek city-states not because it excluded slaves and women from citizenship (as did every society in the history of humankind until quite recently), but rather because it included the poor. Athens even took positive steps to render this equality of public speech effective by introducing pay for the poorest citizens to attend the assembly and to serve as jurors in the courts.

10 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.”

11 *Parrhesia* could have a political aspect. Demosthenes and other orators stressed the duty of those exercising *isegoria* in the assembly to speak their minds. But the concept applied more often outside of the *ekklesia* in more and less informal settings. In the theater, *parrhesiastic* playwrights like Aristophanes offended all and sundry by skewering their fellow citizens, including Socrates, by name. But the **paradigmatic** *parrhesiastes* in the ancient world were the Philosophers, self-styled “lovers of wisdom” like Socrates himself who would confront their fellow citizens in the *agora* and tell them whatever hard truths they least liked to hear. Among these was Diogenes the Cynic, who famously lived in a barrel [...] and told Alexander the Great to get out of his light—all, so he said, to reveal the truth to his fellow Greeks about the arbitrariness of their customs.

12 The danger intrinsic in *parrhesia*’s offensiveness to the powers-that-be—be they monarchs like Alexander or the democratic majority—fascinated Michel Foucault, who made it the subject of a series of lectures at Berkeley (home of the original campus Free Speech Movement) in the 1980s. Foucault noticed that the practice of *parrhesia* necessarily entailed an asymmetry of power, hence a “contract” between the audience (whether one or many), who pledged to tolerate any offense, and the speaker, who agreed to tell them the truth and risk the consequences.

13 If *isegoria* was fundamentally about equality, then, *parrhesia* was about liberty in the sense of license—not a right, but rather an unstable privilege enjoyed at the pleasure of the powerful. In Athenian democracy, that usually meant the majority of one’s fellow citizens, who were known to shout down or even drag speakers they disliked (including Plato’s brother, Glaucon) off the *bema*. This ancient version of “no-platforming” speakers who offended popular sensibilities could have deadly consequences—as the trial and death of Socrates, Plato’s friend and teacher attests.

paradigmatic: model example

My Notes

14 Noting the lack of success that Plato’s loved ones enjoyed with both *isegoria* and *parrhesia* during his lifetime may help explain why the father of Western philosophy didn’t set great store by either concept in his works. Plato no doubt would have noticed that, despite their differences, *neither* concept relied upon the most famous and distinctively Greek understanding of speech as *logos*—that is, reason or logical argument. Plato’s student, Aristotle, would identify *logos* as the capacity that made human beings essentially political animals in the first place. And yet neither *isegoria* nor *parrhesia* identified the reasoned speech and arguments of *logos* as uniquely deserving of equal liberty or license. Which seems to have been Plato’s point—how was it that a democratic city that prided itself on free speech, in all of its forms, put to death the one Athenian ruled by *logos* for speaking it? [...]

15 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 witnessed at an event at Kenyon College in September, when confronted with such arguments the response from 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.

16 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 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 clear—including the contrasting appeal to *parrhesia* by their opponents, who sometimes seem determined to reduce “free speech” to a license to offend.

17 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* 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 individuals while denying it to others.

My Notes

18 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 last.

Making Observations

- What ideas in the text capture your attention?
- What about freedom of speech do you know now that you didn't before?
- What questions did you have while reading this text?

arbitrariness: not being based on any principle, plan, or system

Returning to the Text

- Return to the essay as you respond to the following questions. Use text evidence to support your responses.
 - Write any additional questions you have about the text in your Reader/Writer Notebook.
2. What controversy does the author describe in the first paragraph of the essay?

3. Reread the second paragraph of the article and summarize the author's thesis.

4. Notice the author's use of the word *non sequitur* in the third paragraph. *Non sequitur* is a foreign word that is now frequently used in English. What does the term *non sequitur* mean in the third paragraph? What point does the author make by using it?

5. How does the author's reference to John Stuart Mill in the fourth paragraph support the idea expressed in the third paragraph?

6. According to the author, what common translation do the words *isegoria* and *parrhesia* share, and why is that translation inadequate when discussing democratic ideas of free speech?

7. Of the two types of free speech described by the author, which is protected by the government and which is subject to the will of the people? Explain.

8. What does the author believe is the best approach toward free speech in the private sector? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Working from the Text

9. Work with your group to come up with questions to ask about the text that would help a reader deepen his or her understanding and gain information about the freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment and how it is being interpreted or misinterpreted on some college campuses today. Write your questions in the space. Then return to the text to find evidence that would support their answers. If the text does not answer your questions, conduct an informal research project to find the answers. Remember to use text evidence in your answers by quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing in ways that avoid plagiarism and gives credit to your sources.

Check Your Understanding

With the essay in mind, write three questions about freedom of speech: one literal, one interpretive, and one universal.