



A certain degree of inconvenience

The McGill administration and the language of “values”

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What should we make of the McGill administration’s recent decision to frame its protocol for managing the extent of political organization and activism on campus in terms of a “Statement of Values Concerning Freedom of Expression and Freedom of Peaceful Assembly”? One of my own teachers, Professor Edward Andrew, thought and wrote a great deal about the implications of the language of “values,” most notably in his tremendous book *The Genealogy of Values*. Thinking of him reminds me that the language of values is far from neutral when it comes to our most cherished commitments.

To adopt the language of values, Ed writes, is “To deny that anything is intrinsically worthy...to claim that nothing is invaluable or priceless; that everything is a matter of choice, taste, wilful estimation, perspectival appraisal or market evaluation, that nothing is a common good, a shared love or a universal need.” The language of values has been smuggled into our moral and political vocabulary from economics, where goods are converted to values through the mechanisms of price and exchange. There is no such thing as ‘inherent’ or ‘intrinsic’ value. The value of a thing is derived from the price someone is willing to pay for it, or what someone is willing to exchange it for, in a market of competing values.

When the administration frames its commitment to freedom of expression and association as an expression of its “values,” its intention is to suggest that it takes this commitment very seriously. However, this intention is belied by the framing of this commitment as a matter of mere values. As Ed puts it: “If we translate the language of principles into the language of values we are implicitly encouraging a politics of value trade-offs, not principled stands...one stands on principle, one trades in values. Principles are non-negotiable, values are negotiable.”

Think about it. We never characterize the things that are most important to us – the things we need, or love, or have an obligation to care for – as mere values. Try to imagine someone saying, ‘I value food,’ or ‘I value my children’ or ‘I value my community’ and you will get a sense of the absurdity of expressing that which is fundamental to our being as one of our ‘values’. To use one of Ed’s favourite illustrations, when a lover tells you that they “really value your friendship,” you know you are on your way out the door, about to be exchanged for another.

This places the administration’s declaration that freedom of expression and freedom of association are among its values in a new light. For while the intention of the proposed statement is ostensibly to signal that these are fundamental to the very being of the University, it actually accomplishes the opposite. By characterizing these freedoms as mere values, the Administration is signalling that, while it is generally happy to have them around, it is quite willing to let them go in exchange for something else it considers more valuable.

What other values might the administration be willing to take in exchange for the values of free expression and assembly? Under current conditions at the university this list is potentially long, but one item stands out in both the Statement of Values itself and in the Operating Procedures that accompany it: convenience. Both documents indicate that the exercise of free expression and assembly require tolerance of “a certain degree of inconvenience” but no more than that, affirming by implication that “a certain degree” of convenience is a value that not only competes with, but also trumps, the values of free expression and assembly at this university.

“Values” is the name we assign to those things we are prepared to exchange for other valuable things, but to which we nevertheless wish to appear strongly committed. Weak commitment to things that are invaluable is not caused by the language of values – rather, recourse to the language of values arises from commitments that are actually weaker than they seem to be. This means the administration cannot fix its Statement simply by substituting the word “principles” for “values.” The substance of the Statement and its accompanying Procedure confirm that the language of values expresses perfectly how the administration really feels about these freedoms.

Even if our values cannot ever adequately express our most deeply held principles and commitments, they are a symptom of what we believe we are. To some of us, it is inconceivable that a university could relegate freedom of expression and assembly to the status of mere values. Beyond this, the assertion that these are values which can be traded for something as meagre as convenience somehow seems beneath the dignity of this place. The price is at once too low and too high: too low because convenience is not enough to take in exchange for freedoms that are fundamental to the being of the university; too high because any university that is willing to make such a bargain cannot long remain a university in anything but name.

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