Multiculturalism Bites
Alan Haworth on Free Speech

David Edmonds:
In 2005, a number of cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad were published in a Danish newspaper – sparking Islamic protests across the world. This was one of a number of high profile cases in which the principle of free speech and expression has come under strain in our multicultural society. The publication of Salman Rushdie's novel Satanic Verses was another. A certain sort of liberal takes it as axiomatic that we should have the right to publish anything we like – even if others find it offensive. But Alan Haworth, author of a book on free speech, is not so sure.

Nigel Warburton:
Alan Haworth, we're going to focus on free speech. Where do you stand on that issue?

Alan Haworth:
Free speech can't mean the freedom to say anything at all. There are people around, who I suppose you'd call free speech fundamentalists, who say things like, 'Well everybody's got a right to be as offensive as they like'. But that's obviously silly. Obviously if I were to go out into the street and pick on some person at random and just gratuitously abuse them they would be offended. But I don't really see why I should have any particular right to do that.

NW:
Yes, people usually distinguish between liberty and licence. So liberty is a kind of freedom that we want to have that involves drawing some limits around the freedom; licence is anything goes. So you're saying that in the area of free speech it's never a matter of anything goes, that's obvious.

AH:
That's obvious, but I do think there is something called free speech is important. I follow a lot of writers in holding that there has to be a certain kind of situation and a certain kind of proposition which ought to be legally protected. And one ought to have a right to say those sorts of things in those sorts of contexts even when maybe one is being offensive. So the problem is to define the context and the type of proposition for which that is the case. Now that's where the philosophy comes in. I suppose the most famous, consequentialist defence of free speech is John Stuart Mill's and the most influential deontological defence of free speech is John Rawls' defence, right? Now what both those writers do is define a context and a type of a proposition.They explain why, what they call the right to free speech, is important.

NW:
Well we should probably take each of those in turn and just give a little overview of what they did say. So with John Stuart Mill, he was interested in drawing the limit of free speech at the point where somebody is actually instigating violence.

AH:
Well he has this famous example where he talks about a man standing in front of a corn dealer's house, preaching that corn dealers are starvers of the poor. And what that is supposed to illustrate is a distinction between action and speech. As Mill says, 'Well incitement to a riot is bad, whereas passing the same idea around in the form of a pamphlet is maybe an okay thing to do'. But I don't think that particular example works actually. What it doesn't recognise is that speaking or publishing or writing is in fact a form of action, depending on where and how you do it.

NW:
Okay so let's look at John Rawls. What's John Rawls' approach?

AH:
I've been rethinking John Rawls because it seems to me that the difference between his early work and his later work is much greater than people have generally recognised. His early work, *A Theory of Justice*, what he does there is he connects what he calls liberty of conscience, and the liberty to speak in political contexts; he equates it with the right to vote: just as we have a right to have an input into the democratic decision-making process, so we have a right to advocate the political positions of which we approve. So I think that is an argument for free speech, although it may not be the only one, it focuses on a particular kind of context. In his later work, it's more interesting because he talks about what he calls the idea of public reason. He's coming nearer to Mill's position actually. He thinks there is a sort of area of debate within which we all have a right to participate and which ought to be protected.

NW:
You mentioned earlier that you shouldn't just be free to go into the street and be really offensive to somebody. Why not?

AH:
Well because offensiveness is bad isn't it. Can I just take Mill as an example. I mean what Mill does is connect the liberty to speak, 'speak' being a kind of stand-in for publish, write, send texts, you know all those things. Now he connects the liberty to speak with progress and he connects progress with the discovery of truth. And then he sort of has a model of the search for truth as being rather like the search for scientific truth. What it adds up to is a defence of the right to advance propositions for debate in the cause of the search for truth. You know if I was just to walk out in the street and go up to some person and say, 'Hey you smell', I really wouldn't be advancing the search for truth. If you're feeling rather excited about free speech, go and buy a copy of *OK! Magazine*, I found a wonderful quotation from the then current edition of *OK! Magazine* in which it was reported that Victoria Beckham likes to spend time on her mobile phone, chatting to her friend Madonna, which is no doubt true. Now just suppose Victoria Beckham, for some reason she'd wanted that piece of information suppressed, I really can't see any reason why she shouldn't have. There's nothing valuable or truth-enhancing or progress-enhancing about that particular piece of information, right? So there are some kinds of utterance where it's just obviously silly to say, 'Everybody's right to say these things and publish these things should be defended in the name of free speech'.

NW:
Let's put this in the context of multiculturalism. There are many occasions in a multicultural society when people from different groups express views, what they see to be truths, which are perceived as incredibly offensive to each other.

AH:
I, as a follower of Mill, think that what a liberal philosophy should do is articulate principles to which different groups can subscribe, or ought to subscribe, and I think free speech is one of those. We're going to have to have a public debate, we're going to have to accept something like Rawls' idea of public reason, if we're going to accommodate ourselves to a multicultural situation.

NW:
Well take the example of the Danish cartoons where a number of cartoonists caricatured Mohammed. That led to rioting in several different countries around the world, are you saying that it was wrong for the editors to go ahead and publish those cartoons in Denmark and elsewhere?

AH:
I think it's easy to underestimate the power of cartoons. If you read histories of the pre-Second World War Germany it can be very persuasively argued that the Holocaust could never have taken place had the press not first of all softened up the German psyche to accept

a fairly heavy degree of anti-Semitism. And if you look at the newspapers at the time, you can see the role that cartoons played in that. It's the kind of drip, drip effect. You can see the same thing happening, not to the same degree, I hope, but you'll find a paper which carries a headline about Muslims, 'Muslims try to stop us having fun' or something, you know 'Muslims ate my hamster', that kind of thing. One of those headlines in itself is harmless, but it's the continual drip, drip effect that I think is important. I don't think there's an argument of principle there at all. You have to ask yourself, ;To what extent are these publishers of these cartoons making a contribution to debate?' And I'm assuming all the time there that there's a kind of presupposition in favour of speech. What we need are reasons why in particular situations that needs to be limited. If you're Mill you say, 'Well are these people advancing propositions for debate in the cause of the search for truth?' Well, you know, I think not really, I mean they're just cartoons aren't they. On the other hand, if you're Rawls you might say, 'Are these people making an input into the democratic decision-making process in some way?' if you're the early Rawls. Well maybe there's something to be said there, 'We don't like the way we're having to sort of kowtow to these rather conservative elements in our society'. So you need to look at it and ask yourself what model it fits.

NW:
Mill was explicit that causing offence is tolerable: it's not a harm in his view. It's only when there is actual harm that you're justified in censoring other people's views.

AH:
Well Mill doesn't always connect that argument with the right to liberty of thought and discussion, he connects it with this idea that everybody has a right to live their life in their own way, free from state interference insofar as possible. Then again, there's a standard problem with Mill about how you define harm. Again we get the sort of drip, drip thing. If I publish a cartoon, which implies that Nigel Warburton is a bit of an idiot, if I do this day after day and lots of other people do the same thing, and damage your reputation, it's arguable that I'm harming you.

NW:
That may be true, but for Mill the way that you meet that kind of public expression is with counter speech, the argument on the other side. So he's got this almost economic model of the collision of truth with error and somehow hopefully truth will emerge. And even if it doesn't, people have had the chance to express their views and that's very important to many people, that they don't have their views suppressed.

AH:
Look, imagine a philosophy seminar. Here we all are, sitting round a table discussing some proposition. Now in a situation like that, each of us is in a fairly equal situation, power-wise. Each of us is free in turn to advance a view, each person can then criticise the view. Now in an ideal situation, in doing that, we're advancing towards the discovery of truth. I mean anybody who's actually done a degree in philosophy might be a bit sceptical of that ideal, but that's the idea. Now, I would say that the more society resembles that sort of situation, the more you can actually pick out an article in *The Independent* and then maybe another counter-article in *The Times*, maybe you can say, 'Well this is all a bit like a debate, we're all getting towards the truth. That's good.' Now in a lot of situations where free speech issues arises at the moment, it probably isn't really like that. In situations such as the one in which the cartoon issue arose, I mean maybe you have unequal power relationships. You know, you have a minority and a majority and maybe you could say that by publishing certain sorts of things in the press, you're victimising the minority.

NW:
Does it follow, from what you've been saying, that you would have bannedd Salman Rushdie's <u>The Satanic Verses</u> which wasn't overtly trying to contribute to a straightforward sense of the truth. And it wasn't extensibly a contribution to a political debate.

AH:
Well it depends what you think the function of literature is, and I mean Salman Rushdie himself has an article somewhere where he talks about literature as a kind of playground

where people bounce ideas off each other and try out different views and so on. It does seem to me that Mill's argument focuses too closely on the idea of scientific progress. He actually says on liberty, that a time will come when, I can't remember how he phrases it, but we will know everything. Now of course there are an awful lot of propositions which people argue about, which don't strictly fit the model of natural science. I mean even in history, for example, you argue about what the motives of the French revolutionaries were for example. You're not going to settle that by performing experiments. And I think maybe literature involves the sort of free play of ideas and so on.

NW:
But where you have some groups who say, 'Look, these particular ideas, these particular words even, are sacrosanct. If you dare to say something that we find deeply offensive then there'll be serious consequences'. That seems to shut off my freedom to express ideas.

AH:
Well, if you follow Rawls and you take his idea of public reason seriously, I mean supposing you were a serious Catholic, somebody says, 'The Pope is not infallible' and you were very offended by this. Or maybe about abortion: somebody thinks that abortion should be available on demand. Now the idea of public reason means if you object to that, and you have to give reasons why you object to it, you have to appeal to principles which the rest of your community, including people who don't subscribe to your belief system, can accept. So in the case of that example, right, if you were a Catholic and you want to argue that abortion is wrong because the Pope says it's wrong, nobody who isn't a Catholic is going to take any notice of you.You might alternatively appeal to the principles which do get evoked in philosophical debates about abortion. You know, when is a foetus a person? So the answer to your question is, if you take the idea of public reason seriously is that there have to be principles to which you can appeal, which others in your community will accept. And that in turn is required by the fact that we live in multicultural, diverse societies.

NW:
In a world where a white Church of England fourth generation individual is living next to a second generation Muslim on one side, a Polish immigrant worker on the other, isn't there a huge potential for a clash? It could be extremely damaging if people just speak their minds and don't hold back on what they say. So are we living in a world where there's a greater necessity for censorship?

AH:
Well no, I would say the reverse. If you assume that picture of the society as true, I mean your nextdoor neighbours, however much you dislike them, are not going to go away. No, either we're going to have a society which is riven by violence and aggravation, or we're going to have to find some way of rubbing shoulders and getting along with each other. I mean this is not to do with the philosophy; it just seems to be a fact. You know, that's when people are going to have to learn to put up with things that they might otherwise find offensive - end of story. I don't see that's a philosophical question actually, it just seems to be true.

NW:
Alan Haworth, thank you very much.

AH:
Thank you. Thank you, Nigel. [ends]