

Free Speech: A Very Short Introduction (2009)
by Nigel Warburton

NOTES FOR READING GROUPS

About The Book

This short book provides a critical overview of the main arguments for free speech, one of the most important topics of our age. As part of the Oxford University Press Very Short Introduction series it is intended for a general readership and does not use technical language nor presuppose knowledge of philosophy. The author outlines John Stuart Mill's classic defence of free speech, showing its continuing relevance (and limitations) in relation to present day situations, including debates about blasphemy, Holocaust denial, pornography, copyright and communication via the Internet.

About The Author

Nigel Warburton is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the UK's Open University. Best known as the author of *Philosophy: The Basics* and as the interviewer on the popular *Philosophy Bites* podcast, his websites include *Virtual Philosopher* (www.virtualphilosopher.com), *Art and Allusion* (www.artandallusion.com), *Philosophy Bites* (www.philosophybites.com) and a site devoted to *Free Speech: A Very Short Introduction* (www.vsi-free-speech.com) which includes many links to related material. Nigel also has a monthly column 'Everyday Philosophy' in *Prospect Magazine* and regularly teaches on aesthetics for Tate Modern. He tweets at www.twitter.com/philosophybites.

More information about Nigel Warburton at www.nigelwarburton.com

Contact the author on nigelwarburton@aol.com

Reviews

'Crisp clear and astute, this is a thought-provoking introduction to one of the most hotly-contested questions of our time' Lisa Appignanesi, President of English PEN.

'The genius of Nigel Warburton's *Free Speech* lies not only in its

extraordinary clarity and incisiveness. Just as important is the way Warburton addresses freedom of speech - and attempts to stifle it - as an issue for the 21st century' Denis Dutton, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, and creator of Arts and Letters Daily (www.alddaily.com)

A review in *The Independent* (13.03.09)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/free-speech-by-nigel-warburton-1643537.html>

A review in *The Washington Times* (1.5.09)

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/free-speech-by-nigel-warburton-1643537.html>

Podcasts

Nigel Warburton reads an abbreviated extract from CH1 of Free Speech A VSI:

<http://nigelwarburton.typepad.com/files/free-speech-vsi.mp3>

Nigel Warburton on how free speech can energise us:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/nigel-warburton>

Nigel Warburton interviews Tim Scanlon on Free Speech:

<http://www.open2.net/ethicsbites/free-speech.html>

Nigel Warburton interviews Mill's biographer Richard Reeves about Mill's *On Liberty*:

http://nigelwarburton.typepad.com/philosophy_bites/2008/04/richard-reeves.html

Other Books by this Author (selected)

Philosophy: The Basics

Philosophy: The Classics (part of which is also available as a podcast)

Thinking from A to Z

The Art Question

Ernö Goldfinger: The Life of an Architect

Questions for Discussion

1. Have there been any recent news stories that are examples of the conflict between those who desire free speech and those who would rather curb some speech?
2. Where do members of your group stand on the issue of the Danish cartoons? Why?
3. Is it as easy as John Stuart Mill thought to distinguish between those actions which offend but don't incite violence, and those that incite violence?
4. Was Mill over-optimistic about the consequences of allowing a free market of ideas?
5. What are the strongest arguments for censoring Holocaust denial? Do they defeat the arguments that some liberals use to defend Holocaust deniers right to express their views so long as they aren't inciting violence?
6. Could psychological harm be as serious as physical harm? If so, what are the implications for Free Speech?
7. Should anyone give a platform to those with deeply offensive views? Why would anyone think they should?
8. Was it right that the law on blasphemy was dropped in the UK?
9. What is the 'Heckler's Veto'? Why is it a problem?
10. Are religious beliefs different from other kinds of beliefs? Do they merit special protection against speech that believers find offensive?
11. Is hate speech a kind of speech that should be permitted?
12. Is pornography a free speech issue?
13. Should we tolerate a greater range of expression in the arts than we would in other realms of life?

14. Where do you stand on the Mapplethorpe photograph described in Chapter 4?

15. Do we need to revise our thoughts about free speech because of the technological and social changes brought about by the Internet? If so, how?

16. Could it ever be right to burn a book?

A Questionnaire

I should be free to:

- 1) Express dissatisfaction with Government policy
AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 2) Make fun of people with red hair AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 3) Blaspheme AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 4) Publish a novel that includes detailed information about how to be an effective contract killer AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 5) Say offensive things about homosexuals AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 6) Mock bishops AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 7) Criticize the orthodox teachings of the major religions
AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 8) Make racist comments in public AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 9) View (and possibly create) pornography that has been made by consenting adults AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

- 10) Write a book which quotes an entire poem written by a living poet without her permission AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

11) Publish jokes about Muhammed AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

12) Display in public photographs of a naked 4-yearold girl
AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

13) Wave a placard that reads 'Freedom of Press Go To Hell!'
AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

14) Deny the Holocaust in public AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

15) Burn the Union Jack as an act of protest AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

16) Burn the Koran in a public place AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

17) Burn The Satanic Verses in a public place AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

18) Suggest that Jesus was gay AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

19) Create and publish composite photographs that appear to depict young
children having sex with adults. AGREE/DISAGREE/UNSURE

[ends]