

Mar 31, 2021, 2:14 PM

Hi Mina,

I thought you should have a copy of what I wrote to Jeanette about this. I asked that the letter be passed on to the FEC, so perhaps you saw it already. No one, after these many months (since November) responded to it.

Dear Jeanette,

I had been meaning to contact you concerning what transpired when I introduced the letter on freedom of expression at the last FA meeting. I wanted to tell you that I felt it was unjustified for many of our colleagues to blame you for the "harm" that the order of the October agenda, they claimed, did to them. By this they meant it was "triggering", "unsafe", and indeed "harmful" that I was making those points in defense of academic freedom so soon after the update on the Faculty response to the SVA letter had been given. It seems to me that the argument that our colleagues were making goes like this: Because what Saul said was harmful (in the context of the FA's order of business) and because insufficient time was allowed for the matter to be deliberated on and discussed, that you, Jeanette, were wrong to have allowed Saul to speak then and there. In other words, the conclusion to be drawn from this argument is that the points on academic freedom, as I expressed them then and there (and you know how hard I pressed over months to have this urgent matter brought up in our department, in the FA, and to the administration) should not have been allowed to have been uttered. This is exactly an instance of the kind of intolerance and censoriousness, the muzzling of freedom of expression, that the Letter on Academic Freedom/Freedom of Expression was deeply worried about.

At today's FA meeting you agreed that I did harm. You recognized the "harm caused by last month's proceedings (I'm paraphrasing)." The implication is that allowing me to speak words in favor of academic freedom and urging the points that I did, caused harm. Am I right to further infer that you were agreeing that you should not have allowed me to speak those words (then and there in the space allowed)?

I am writing to you for myself--not on behalf of any group or on behalf of our department--though what I am here saying is, I believe, a point-of-view consistent with the two Letters on Academic Freedom that I worked on with others. It is wrong to assume that just because a group of people feels that some uttered idea has caused them harm (caused them to feel unsafe, has "triggered" them, etc.) that that ends the matter and the idea that supposedly caused the harm should be specially restricted in its expression or should be somehow prohibited. The harm claim cannot in and by itself lead to restrictions on the expression of thought and ideas. At any dialogue or forum I am prepared to make good on this fundamental point.

I sure welcome the outline of a plan you introduced for a dialogue between the different groups and positions. Work toward such a dialogue is needed and I thank you for urging

that we work toward that end. But I'm writing to make clear that the claim--let's call it the claim made by proponents of "safetyism"--that harm has been caused by some person's utterance, and that the claimed hurt is enough to cancel or restrict that person's utterance, is exactly what I am challenging and questioning. So, as we work toward bringing about the needed dialogue, this point begs for clarity: just because my view as I express it is different from that of others, even deplored and stigmatized as "harmful" by many others, cannot lead to the conclusion that my words *actually* do (or did) cause harm and cannot then lead to the call for an official—in this case the head of the FA-- to treat them as if they really were a threat to anybody's personal safety. Such a leap in logic and ethics is profoundly and doubly wrong. The question of whether my words (or the expressed thoughts of *any member of our community*) are a threat to safety is one matter, among others, that needs to be addressed and debated by the community. Your recognition of "the harm" done by my little talk, which ironically enough was on the subject of free expression, jumped the gun. You assumed something to be so, the threat to safety, that you had no right to assume.

Anyone joining in a dialogue about this issue will think and say whatever they hold to be true. Of course. What ought not to happen, though, is that the very argument I am questioning and saying is actually a bad argument be 1) assumed to be valid by organizers and moderators of the dialogue and 2) enforced so that I am not allowed to express my views without some group hollering that I am causing pain, I am triggering, and all the rest of the exaggerated claims of those of the safety-ist persuasion. No one need agree with my anti-safety-ist view in order to grant that I have a right to offer my reasons for believing that safety-ism (at least the safety-ism rampant at MICA) is a rhetoric which effectively closes down and restricts public thought and debate. People with a disposition to feeling pain and feeling unsafe when, at some forum, I think out loud concerning freedom of speech and freedom of thought in the academy, need somehow to momentarily overcome that pain in order to consider what I have to say, just as I need to overcome whatever resistance I have to considering what they are thinking out loud.

On the question of a moderator: We are grown up enough, I hope, to moderate ourselves without needing to bring in some supposed expert from outside. Firmin has been working for a possible reconciliation between the sides, just as I believe he works toward that in other spheres of life. Let Firmin moderate.

Please convey this email to the FEC and to anyone else who is trying to decide what is the right path to take in setting up a dialogue.

Once again, Jeanette, I'm sorry that you were blamed for helping to "cause harm." From my point of view this criticism of you (aimed just as much or more at me) has the effect of restricting public speech and debate. When I look around the world I see instances where teachers face real threats to their safety and real harm: that poor fellow in France comes to mind. He paid with his life for teaching a class on freedom of expression.

My best,
Saul

Mina Cheon <[REDACTED]>
to Alan, Firmin, Jeanette, me

Mar 31, 2021, 7:58 PM

Saul,
I am directing this email to some of the FEC copied here.

Saul Myers <[REDACTED]>
to Mina

Mar 31, 2021, 10:40 PM

I thought FEC saw it . Thanks for sending it.

Saul Myers <[REDACTED]>
to Mina

Apr 1, 2021, 10:43 AM

Clarification,

I did receive something from Jeanette, but it was a bureaucratic response which did not take up directly my question whether she, as head of the FEC, believed that my talk on freedom of expression harmed anyone, was a real threat to anyone's safety, and whether she had told the FA that I should not have been allowed to speak on freedom of expression/academic freedom. Further, and perhaps most important, what she sent me did not engage the general arguments I gave against 'safety-ism' --my contention that this rhetoric is used to restrict and shut down dissenting views.

Saul