**We should allow an HIV-denier to speak at City College**

HIV-deniers are a group of scientists, scholars, and activists that doubt that the disease AIDS is caused by the virus HIV. When AIDS first emerged, there were different theories about what causes the disease. Eventually evidence accumulated that it is caused by the virus HIV. Today, there is overwhelming evidence that this is the case. However, some individuals remain unconvinced and publicly promote alternative theories. At some point, the South African government changed their AIDS related policies under the influence of HIV-denialism. It has been estimated that as a consequence, over 300,000 people died (Natrass, 2008).

In this paper, I want to discuss a (hypothetical) scenario, in which an HIV-denier asks to use a room at the City College to present their views to the faculty and students at City College. The question is whether we, the City College community, should allow the speaker to use a room and present their views. I will argue that we should allow the speaker to speak at City College. I will present two arguments in support of my position and then address an argument that is commonly used in situations like this to argue against allowing the speaker to spread their ideas.

The first argument for allowing the speaker to address the academic community is that denying them the opportunity would set a precedent that is likely to be appealed to in future cases. The community of HIV experts is, with very few exceptions, united in their conviction that AIDS is caused by HIV. There is very good evidence that this is the case. Reducing the viral load with drugs, for example, leads to a reduction in the AIDS symptoms, and infecting monkeys with the virus leads to AIDS symptoms and ultimately death. However, in many other scientific controversies the evidence is much less clear. The theory that global climate changes are caused by human activity, for example, is a much more complex problem than whether a certain virus causes a certain disease. Most scientists agree that human activity causes global climate change, but because the data is very complex, the evidence is not as clear as in the case of HIV causing AIDS. Other questions, like wether vitamin D prevents cancer, or which diet is more likely to result in weight loss are even more difficult to decide based on the available data.

Certainly, we would not want to exclude everybody who supports an opinion that is counter the mainstream opinion from the discussion on campus. This would make it impossible for the academic community to ever change their mind on any topic, which is opposite the spirit of academia and science that is to collect more evidence so that we can adjust our believes accordingly. Ultimately, many radical changes in our understanding of the world start with a single person who is the first to openly disagree with the mainstream opinion. To preserve the possibility of changing mainstream opinion, even opinions that are only held by a single individual should be heard.

The second argument for allowing an HIV-denier to speak at City College that I will discuss is that denying them permission to speak could actually give HIV-denialism undeserved credibility. Outsider opinions (like conspiracy theories) often get credibility from attempts to suppress them. The public perception is often that attempts by established academics to prevent differing opinions from being heard is a sign that, if they would be heard, people would realize that the outsider opinion is actually right. If the HIV-deniers do not have to have their supposed evidence exposed to scrutiny, they can always pretend that they have good evidence for their view, but are not allowed to present it. In contrast, when they are allowed to present it, it will become clear that they have no evidence.

This argument is specific to the setting at a university. The audience at a university can be expected to be capable of evaluating what is presented themselves, or under the guidance of a professor in class. The same would not be true, if the question would be whether we should allow HIV-deniers to present their views at a community meeting or high school, where audiences may consider anybody who gives a professionally presented talk on a scientific topic as an authority figure.

This argument is also specific to HIV-denialism. HIV-denialism is a movement based largely at research universities. The principle figure in HIV-denialism is Peter Duesberg, a tenured professor at Berkely University. It would therefore be difficult to argue that inviting an HIV-deniers would give credibility to HIV-deniers. They already have credibility due to their university affiliations. The situation would be different for a movement that is based outside of academia. Inviting somebody who believes that the moon landings were faked by NASA and there were no actual moon landings to speak at a university, for example, would give moon landing conspiracy theories undeserved edibility. The prominent moon-landing conspiracists are not affiliated with universities, but amateur historians. Allowing them to speak at a university would therefore elevate them into the academic rank. The HIV-deniers, on the other hand, are already within the academic community.

Some people may agree with the points I made about the importance of listening to fringe opinions and to engage with those spreading falsehoods rather than ignoring them, and still hold that letting an HIV-denier speak at City College is a bad idea. The stakes, they may believe, are just too high. These people may say that when there is a purely academic disagreement, for example about whether a certain dinosaur species lived 60 or 70 million years ago, then all opinions should be heard. However, the question what causes AIDS is too important to subject to such academic treatment. If people are convinced that AIDS is not an infectious disease, they will not use protection when having sex, even when they have AIDS. They will not take antiviral drugs. And eventually, after having transmitted the disease to many others, they will die. As mentioned in the introduction, if governments are convinced by the arguments of HIV-denialists, the consequences are even more disastrous. HIV-deniers have been called "enablers to mass murder" for the deaths of the hundreds of thousands of AIDS patients in South Africa (Linzer, 2009). Is it really worth risking that people become convinced of a falsehood that has as dangerous consequences as believing that AIDS is not a transmittable disease, just to keep up academic decorum?

To people putting forth this argument, I would respond by saying that almost all falsehoods are dangerous. It is a normal part of life that some people will remain unconvinced by even the most convincing evidence and make life-or-death decisions accordingly. For example, Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple Inc. and by many accounts a highly intelligent man, died at the age of 56 of a curable cancer because he resisted his doctors' recommendations for evidence-based medical intervention and instead tried to cure his cancer by changing his diet. According to Barrie R. Cassileth, the chief of Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center's integrative medicine department, "he essentially committed suicide" (Szabo, 2013). Similarly, large numbers of people with access to medical treatment die every year because they decide to rely on homeopathy instead of evidence-based medicine even for life-threatening conditions (Freckelton 2012).

It is not the responsibility of society, and especially not of universities, to tell people what decisions to make. It is the responsibility to make recommendations and to be transparent about the reason for the recommendations. It is furthermore important to make the evidence available for inspection. If people then decide to kill themselves, that is their right. If they are infected with HIV as a consequence of their behavior, they are required by law to inform sexual partners of their infection.

In summary, I think that in the hypothetical scenario discussed here, in which an HIV-denier asks to use a room at the City College to present their views to the faculty and students at City College, the City College community should allow the speaker to use a room and present their views. I presented here two arguments in support of this conclusion. Frist, denying the speaker to present their opinions could set a precedent that would make it easier to deny anybody with an unwelcome view to present their evidence. This would be counter the academic spirit. Secondly, figures at the fringe often gain credibility from the efforts to suppress them. In the specific case of HIV-deniers and a presentation at a university campus, I believe that denying them a room to speak in will do more for how believable their claims are perceived than letting them give the presentation. A plausible argument against letting HIV-deniers speak at City College is that if they convince somebody in the audience that AIDS is not caused by a virus, the consequences could be catastrophic. Against this argument, I argue that it is not the responsibility of a university to protect people from believing falsehoods, but only to give them the tools to detect falsehoods.

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