

On the relationship between life and freedom in the educational system:

Responsibilities in the corona crisis

“How can I cultivate freedom under such constraints?” This is one of the core questions in Kant’s philosophy of education. It is imperative to remember this question in a situation in which educational institutions—and a university is such an institution—are forced to decide between protecting the lives of its members, and protecting their academic freedom, strange though this choice may be.

For there is no doubt that the coronavirus is a threat to our society and to our culture; it is not some amorphous thing, it is not an amusement, a distraction, or delight—it is nothing less than an existential matter. In this situation, an educational institution and its management (like every other member of society) has the inalienable obligation to put physical integrity and above all human life first and foremost. Everything else is secondary. The right to life is absolute and inalienable. All other rights would be moot if we dispensed with the prerequisite for exercising them—namely, existence or life itself. This can result in necessitation and constraint. However: How do we preserve freedom? And: Has this freedom been curtailed in the first place?

In this situation, the management of every institution has a profound responsibility. This is equally true for the management of a university. Nothing and no one can relieve the people charged with responsibility of that responsibility—no general decree from a more or less qualified health authority, no highly qualified virologist, theologian, philosopher, or educator.

Yet what does this mean for a university with regard to the discharging of its tasks and necessarily curtailing its operations?

For over 100 years now, Universität Hamburg has looked to these words as a guiding principle: “To research, to teach, to educate and form”. Forgive me any pathos, but in each of these areas, we must always decide between life and freedom.

Research:

Life—right now, in the face of a global pandemic—means avoiding physical proximity. The term “social distancing” is therefore completely misleading: it does not mean social but physical distance. To preserve life, research activities must proceed without physical contact. This may affect lab work, the social science interview, the therapy session in psychology, and many other areas. If the technical requirements of work do not allow people to practice physical distance, then these work activities must cease. At the beginning of this epidemic, we discovered that a member of our university had fallen prey to the virus. This was a colleague who had worked at the microscope alongside others and who lost the opportunity for a fulfilled life due to the consequences of the virus.

We must weigh the distinctive right to life in the sphere of research over and against the dictates of freedom in research—a freedom that our constitution ensures with a boundlessness unheard of in practically every other nation. The constraints on physical proximity do not affect academic freedom with regard to the choice of research topic and they do not affect the second aspect of freedom in research—the right to publish the findings of your own research. However, they may affect research methods in some cases. Researchers may need to wait awhile for findings. That is just a fact of life. If your methods require physical proximity, you must accept limits on your freedom.

#### Teaching:

With regard to the University’s second responsibility, teaching, the same applies: the right to life demands physical distance. This means that courses requiring attendance—whether lectures, seminars, or exams—may not take place if attendance could pose risk of infection. Young people may be of the opinion that they will survive infection. Nonetheless, it would be a kindness to consider their teachers, who are generally not so young and who, as of the age of roughly 50—according to the Robert Koch Institute—are at a higher risk.

Here, too, we must seek technical solutions to ensure the freedom of teaching to the extent possible. This does not affect the freedom of teaching with regard to subject matter. Nor do the presentation, communication, or expression of academic truth depend upon physical presence. Freedom is affected, however, with regard to what we call “higher education didactics” or higher education teaching. If you believe that academic freedom also covers higher education teaching (and this is controversial), then your freedom may be affected. Teaching in digital form, which is now a necessity, may be seen as a limitation on your

freedom; it is, however, a very minor one if you manage to create technological conditions closely approximating the actual classroom. This means, in particular, ensuring social interaction.

#### Education:

So— education: Education is distinct from research and teaching to the extent that— contrary to what many casually believe—a person engaged in educating him or herself is doing something different from a person who is not. Since the early Enlightenment in Europe, we have understood that “education” means “self-cultivation.” It is something I do for myself, not something somebody does for me. Friedrich Nietzsche’s incomparable dictate to “become who you are” expresses precisely this. It does not mean “Let happen to you what you might be.” Education is a call to the still-uneducated to do everything in their power to cultivate their own humanity.

Restrictions intended to prevent infection do not affect self-cultivation. Self-cultivation is not limited to a specific place nor to specific subjects (and only these subjects) and certainly not to specific people (and only these people). And most certainly not to the self in its purely corporeal form. Education means: reading, thinking, discussing. What else? An institution’s activities must be limited to what is known in the teachings of the Enlightenment as the “call to self-action”—that is, the call to educate oneself. This is also the point of this statement.

#### Administration:

Academic self-governance, as it is practiced in Germany, is not a university’s goal; it is a means of reaching the goal of enlightening. If academic self-governance—the limited right granted by the state to university members to make some necessary decisions on their own—is curtailed, then the university cannot fulfill all of its responsibilities in research, teaching, and education. Thus, the means by which we self-govern are also a matter of concern with regard to the relationship between life and freedom. On the one hand, academic self-governance—and this is not just relevant for committees but for all employees of a university administration—may under no circumstances endanger physical integrity or life. There are no circumstances that would justify risking even a single life or someone’s health. On the other hand, we must do everything we can to realize the goals of a university with regard to freedom. Thus, with regard to academic self-governance, we must also find

technical solutions that enable staff to stay involved in a suitable manner. This involves the use of media platforms now widely available to us, though these may have some restrictions. Due the democratic principles of the state, self-governance is not unconditionally free—it is bound by parliamentary resolutions; thus, academic self-governance adheres to the principle of expediency. Thus, every act of self-governance must contribute to securing academic operations.

#### Conclusion:

The University can—first of all—minimize the restrictions associated with the right of life, but it cannot entirely dispense with them. Secondly, we can fairly say that there is consensus about life and liberty that no one is seriously calling into question. And thirdly, those who have been charged with civic, state, and judicial responsibilities must assume those responsibilities. It is not sufficient for a university's management to slavishly follow the decrees of a government while washing their hands of any further responsibility; management must understand that their responsibility goes beyond general decrees and laws. One cannot be released from personal responsibility. No one has expressed this so trenchantly as Wolfgang Borchert in his drama *The Man Outside*. A soldier to whom responsibility is delegated during the final battle of a war returns, near death, to tell his superior that he wants to give the responsibility back. The leadership of Universität Hamburg does not wish to give the responsibility back to anyone, for we have the responsibility and we will fulfill it.