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## DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY

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Dr. Heather Hemming  
Vice President Academic  
Acadia University

I have just heard that Professor Rick Mehta of the Acadia Psychology Department has been removed from teaching his regular courses next year will be subject to an inquiry carried out by Professor Wayne Mackay of Dalhousie University as a result of complaints from students regarding opinions Professor Mehta expressed in his class on matters relating to First Nations people. I want to give you an argument against doing either of these things.

The argument begins with a distinction that I see between things that we can know by observation and things that we know by inference from things we observe. Taking an example from David Hume, we can observe a match-head sliding along a piece of emory paper and then bursting forth in flame but we cannot observe that the former causes the latter: that is something requiring an inference. Inferences require a background theory, in this case, the theory of combustion.

But theories, like mice in the house, never come alone: there are always too many. So, we have to develop methods to select those theories that we wish to keep. The method that I favour is one in which, first, we encourage the development of many alternative theories and theoretical approaches and, second, we subject each theory and each approach to critical discussion and examination in an open and unbiased intellectual environment. Where the objectives of these activities are to understand the world as it really is, pure and simple, we have what Bernard Williams has called "the project of pure inquiry".

Carrying out this project is a difficult and dangerous task, not just because it is difficult to think hard about theoretical matters, but because novel research –

the kind most needed in this project - is challenging and threatening to others, hence dangerous to the researcher. A safe place to carry out this project is needed and the modern university is that place.

But a university is not a private think-tank where researchers are safe to do their thing away from the public eye, universities are public institutions in which research is not only carried out but disseminated. For this reason, in the university researchers are also professors and one way in which professors disseminate their ideas is by discussing them in their classes. For this discussion to be part of the larger project of pure inquiry, which the university as a whole is engaged in, professors must be able to discuss in their classroom their own theoretical approaches without fear and without prior intellectual constraints. It may be that some students feel uncomfortable with this. That is too bad, but it is a price that has to be paid if we are to preserve the intellectual integrity of the university. Professor Mehta should teach his customary courses next year, with thanks from the university for his courage and integrity.

Tom Vinci

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Vinci". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "T" and a long, horizontal flourish at the end of the name.