

Academic Standards in an Age of Mistrust

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Abstract

This article looks at a three-way debate between Robert Post, Judith Butler, and Stanley Fish over the role of academic standards in our understanding of academic freedom. It argues that skepticism about such standards, anticipated by Post and embraced by Butler and Fish in the early 2000s, foreshadowed the growing doubts about academic freedom and higher education that are now recognized as a crisis. The debate also illustrates why effective responses to this crisis have been hard to come by, particularly for those working in the humanities, as academic trends have played into the hands of opponents of academic freedom on both sides of the political divide.

It is commonplace to acknowledge that academic freedom applies only to competent research and teaching as judged by relevant academic standards. Only professors can do the uniquely academic work of colleges and universities for which academic freedom is needed, and no one supposes that the principles of academic freedom protect incompetent work or teaching. Hence the need for recognized standards that can distinguish good from bad academic work.

As essential as they are, however, the constraints of disciplinary standards present a paradox. If we loosen the demands of scholarly rigor, we risk blurring the line between academic freedom and free speech to the extent that the speech of professors would be of no greater interest than that of anyone else. But often enough, innovative ideas are introduced by rogue scholars, creative thinkers refusing to conform to prevailing norms but who are credited in time with pathbreaking work. If we put too much stress on academic constraints, we risk putting academic work under its own “pall of orthodoxy.”

How this paradox is resolved determines a lot about the protections afforded by academic freedom. Given their centrality, it also turns out that doubts about academic standards could prove to be a loose thread that if tugged at might unravel the whole cloth. Looking at a three-way debate between Robert Post, Judith Butler, and Stanley Fish from a time when our current crises in higher education were barely imaginable, I will suggest this is what has happened. In this debate, Post defends a traditional reading of academic freedom, while Butler and Fish represent two competing critiques rooted in skeptical views widely endorsed in the humanities in

particular. This debate is revealing because it highlights the requirements any successful defense of academic freedom must meet, and what can happen when they are not.

Post and the Standard Account

In “The Structure of Academic Freedom,” Post offers a historically rooted reading of the principles of academic freedom. Throughout, Post keeps the question of these principles’ justification firmly in view—just why should college and university professors enjoy extraordinary freedoms and a level of job protection enjoyed by no other employees in just about any other field?

Post stresses the essential connection between academic freedom and the purpose of higher education, which he dutifully says is “the pursuit of knowledge.” Here he is at particular pains to highlight the priority of the *institution*—it is *the function of colleges and universities* that underwrites the necessity of academic freedom of professors, not professors’ individual interests. Only in their roles as faculty members do individuals have any claims to freedom from interference from administrators, politicians, or the general public. On this reading, the protections of academic freedom are entirely professional, and they are rightfully enjoyed only so long as professors act as professionals. On this view, faculty members are hired and paid to do research and to teach in ways that reliably increase and transmit knowledge. More precisely, they are hired for their recognized accomplishments in an academic discipline trusted to further, in its own way and according to its established methods, this collective mission. Only if there are such higher purposes, and only if professional freedoms are necessary for their pursuit, can we make the argument that professors need academic freedom.

This defense of academic freedom will not convince anyone who does not already believe contemporary colleges and universities do successfully distinguish between scholarship and charlatanism. A skeptic might wonder if disciplinary norms more often act as gatekeeping mechanisms protecting the privileges of rent seekers lucky enough to have captured increasingly rare tenured positions. Indeed, a chorus growing louder by the day insists that a sizable number of entire disciplines now exist that do little but provide sinecures for political activists posing as scholars. Post himself saw the danger. “The institutions of peer review that apply professional standards are perennially vulnerable to suspicion and distrust,” he wrote, adding that “they can always be charged with having become merely the self-serving guardians of entrenched forms of academic power” (Post 2006, 64).

A more radical skeptic might doubt that colleges and universities contribute meaningfully to the production of knowledge, or that this is what makes these institutions uniquely valuable. Alternative ways of gauging the social value of colleges and universities are certainly available—many already believe that higher education pays its way only insofar as colleges and universities teach economically valuable skills to students and produce economically useful research and development. Those on the other side of the political and culture divide complain about this “neoconservative” logic, arguing that it conflates education and job training. They insist instead

that the proper aim of colleges and universities is the advancement of social justice, a component of which is the patricidal dismantling of the “corporate” university itself.

A still more radical skeptic might challenge the assumption that there’s anything we might call “knowledge” or “truth” that is worth producing or discovering in the first place. Perhaps the political goals of the left and right are all we can realistically aspire to, the only question being whose politics will control. Either way, it is quite sensible to subordinate the interests and preferences of professors to such goals, academic freedom be damned.

Traditional Academic Freedom on the Defensive

If Post’s traditional defense of academic freedom is to succeed, we need to answer these skeptics. We need to argue that the work that goes on in colleges and universities is valuable to more than those doing that work and those economically benefiting from it. And we need to be able to trust the determination of what constitutes this uniquely valuable work to faculty by virtue of their disciplinary expertise.

In 2006, Post could optimistically count on public confidence to keep the skeptics at bay. “The public,” he asserted, “genuinely believes that universities have, on the whole, successfully fulfilled their function of producing socially valuable knowledge, and that this production would be seriously compromised were universities to truncate academic freedom.” He remained confident that a bargain of sorts had been reached: “Academic freedom [is] the price the public must pay in return for the social good of advancing knowledge” (Post 2006, 72).

Much has happened since 2006 to undermine this trust. In the wake of the academic annus horribilis that was 2023, it is far easier to conclude public confidence in higher education, and faculty, is in a free fall. What can be done to regain that trust is a question Post had no reason to ask, but it is now unavoidable and remains unanswered. If it is only now being asked with real urgency, the fault lines were already there in the form of just the kinds of skeptics Post had reason to fear. Their hour has arrived, if not quite in the way those occupying named chairs might have imagined.

Butler’s Skepticism

Judith Butler embodies all the varieties of skepticism haunting academic freedom. Butler considers the idea that colleges and universities are home to truth seekers dated and implausible. Such a view, Butler argues, has been undermined and superseded as scholars have come to appreciate and emphasize the historically relative and contested nature of epistemic norms and the concepts scholars use to interpret those parts of the world on which their work focuses. Disciplinary norms always reflect a highly contingent and contested history, Butler thinks—never do they reflect anything so lofty as the indifferent search for truth.

Butler also makes much of the paradox noted above about the appeal to disciplinary standards to both defend and restrain academic freedom, reading it as posing a two-horned

dilemma: “*Either professional norms are necessary restraints that we ought not to question, or professional norms have to bear internal scrutiny*” (Butler 2006, 112; italics in the original). As Butler sees it, to take the first horn is to make academic freedom inherently “conservative” and an obstacle standing in the way of important work. The second horn concedes that academic freedom protects work lying far outside established academic practice, including work that flaunts disciplinary standards and might seem initially to be charlatanism. Firmly siding with the latter reading, Butler argues that the alternative allows the principles of academic freedom to work against the freedom of scholars and teachers by wielding veto power over new and controversial ideas. Better to let a thousand academic flowers bloom.

In sum, Butler finds the traditional understanding of academic freedom woefully narrow and conformist. The humanities in particular, Butler argues, are currently defined by unstable disciplinary standards more often contested than respected. In these fields, the lines between scholarly and nonscholarly and, in particular, between scholarly and political work, are blurred. Here, “dissent is the norm,” and so the space needs to be open for freewheeling and openly political debate. As predicted, the line between academic freedom and free speech becomes hard to discern, and the former harder to defend. If scholars can’t agree on what counts as good work, of what value is any of it?

Fish contra Butler

Stanley Fish shares Butler’s skepticism about the “pursuit of truth” justifications for academic freedom. Fish has little sympathy, however, for Butler’s skepticism about the role of established disciplinary norms in drawing the line between academic and nonacademic work. Indeed, he finds Butler’s willingness to loosen these norms disastrous because it suggests there is nothing distinctive about academic work—if some fields are as fast and loose as Butler suggests, we might well conclude they hardly count as academic disciplines at all.¹

Particularly worrisome to Fish is Butler’s stance on political scholarship. Taken far enough, this defense of openly political work elides the distinction between academic work and political activism, which invites even more serious doubts about the grounds for popular support of academic freedom. Why, Fish wonders, should professors enjoy special job protections so that they can pursue their personal political goals rather than doing the work they were hired to do? That the political work of academics is almost entirely in service to leftist causes only compounds the problem.

¹ Brian Leiter draws just this conclusion; see Leiter 2018.

Fish and Butler contra Post

Though he rejects her skeptical take on disciplinary standards, Fish shares Butler's skepticism about the pursuit of knowledge and truth, a pretense he also finds hubristic and implausible, and in any case question-begging from the perspective of those who reject the implicit "epistemology" lurking in such defenses. To be sure, Fish is happy to talk of the academic life as one devoted to the pursuit of "truth," but the ironizing quotation marks are always there. Like Butler, Fish believes the epistemic and metaphysical assumptions implicit in Post's account of academic freedom are no longer tenable. Here, Fish makes his own contribution to the growing doubts about the value of higher education.

On Fish's reading, accepted academic norms do more than distinguish legitimate scholarship and charlatanism—they also define the "truth" the pursuit and teaching of which professors in particular disciplines are hired to advance. What they *don't* do is distinguish those disciplines that contribute to a collective and cumulative pursuit of knowledge from ersatz disciplines, like astrology, creationism, and phrenology, that do not. Disciplinary lines are drawn entirely by the contingent history of academic practice, and we enjoy no access to a stance outside of this history from which we can judge one set of academic practices as better than another. Had things gone differently, we might still be teaching astrology in universities, and we'd be no worse for it as judged by any objective standards.

If so, academic standards provide no support for the supposed unique and valuable mission of colleges and universities. On Fish's account, rather than helping us approach a final truth, colleges and universities are places where like-minded fellows gather to pursue scholarship according to exacting standards, but to no real effect as judged by the outside world. According to Fish, providing the space and resources for such activities is the only *academic* mission of colleges and universities. If we point to the economic contributions of higher education or its role in fomenting revolution, Fish argues, we have already given up on academics as a unique and uniquely valuable enterprise. So too will we be giving up on academic freedom.

Fish is ruthlessly consistent here. To the question "What, if anything, legitimates' academic norms?" he can only reply "nothing" (Fish 2014, 55). They have value only to those who are happy to work within a practice they find compelling. For those who fancy ever more refined and insightful analyses of *Paradise Lost*—as produced by contemporary English professors—a good college or university is a great place to be. And those outside the academy with interests in such topics may want to be kept apprised of the latest in Milton studies, and maybe a subset will remain willing to pay large sums to have their sons and daughters enjoy similar pursuits for four years.

That Fish's underlying skepticism would lead to a minimalist account of academic freedom is not at all surprising. On his account, academic freedom protects the freedom professors need to do their job, but that job doesn't amount to much because the academic enterprise doesn't amount to much. If Fish is right, professors rightfully enjoy the life they do because—and only so

long as—they successfully teach and do research within their area of expertise. While on the clock they have no business trying to be sages, prophets, activists, social critics, managers, accountants, or auditors. It stands to reason that they enjoy no special status as employees and so need no special freedoms beyond what is necessary for doing the research, teaching, and service they were hired to do. It is indeed “just a job.”

But even this minimalist account of academic freedom is threatened by Fish’s postmodernism. Established academic practice gives Fish one thing Butler lacks: a formal distinction between academic work and nonacademic work. What Fish does not have, any more than Butler does, is a way to explain why colleges and universities deserve continued support from the general public. Why should someone with zero interest in Milton help pay for someone else’s pursuits of such things if it benefits no one? If they can save the world on their own time, as Fish suggested in the title of his well-known 2012 book, professors can surely pursue their hobbies on their own dime.

Without even the veneer of an account of the academic enterprise as contributing to the common good, Fish too leaves the value of academic freedom much in doubt. The tax- and tuition-paying public may support institutions that prepare students for gainful employment or otherwise promote the uncontroversial common good of economic development, but there’s nothing in this that suggests professors they employ ought to be free to teach and research topics that make no such contribution. Nor is there any reason to think universities can do this better or more efficiently than other sorts of institutions.

Taking Stock

We have, then, three accounts of academic freedom and its justification. With tradition, Post supposes academic freedom is safe so long as higher education is seen by most people as making a unique and valuable contribution to the common good. This confidence depends on an enduring belief that socially valuable knowledge can be acquired and transmitted through academic study and that the production of this knowledge requires robust academic freedom protections for individual professors. That belief is fading.

Butler doubts higher education contributes to the pursuit of knowledge or truth as well as the legitimacy of strict disciplinary standards that purport to set the terms of what counts as academic work worthy of protection. What higher education can do is promote political causes. Even more optimistically than Post, Butler apparently believes the public will support this aim by funding work that has surrendered any pretense of contributing to measurable epistemic progress and which refuses to defer to any but the weakest of academic norms. That there will continue to be strong support for thoroughly politicized colleges and universities is looking ever more doubtful as well.

Fish joins Butler on the first point, but nonetheless imagines academic standards can do the job that defenders of academic freedom need them to do while surrendering any of Post’s

commitment to higher education as an agent of the common good. For reasons that remain mysterious, he expects continued public support for a professoriate whose work makes no meaningful contact with the world outside an ivory tower that has long lost its luster. Fish too looks to have anticipated attacks on higher education he himself did not intend, as the perceived uselessness of the humanities in particular drives plummeting enrollment.

Each of these thinkers, in their own way, leaves academic freedom in serious doubt, and—in a remarkable convergence of forces—questions raised in theory are now driving serious political threats to higher education as a whole. Of the three, Post is, I think, in the strongest position philosophically, but academics are only now realizing how late the hour has grown. As they scramble to formulate and broadcast long-overdue rallying calls to protect the traditional mission of colleges and universities while pushing back against their transfiguration, forces on both the left and right are insisting that it's always already just politics.

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