Are universities in the grip of a wrong academic ethos?
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Text for Ethical Forum, 4th December 2025, Academic freedom under attack; also from within?

Good evening,

I'll try to offer a brief round-up. First, my thanks to everyone: the organisation, our keynote speakers, discussants, our host, and of course the audience. Together you've contributed to a rich academic reflection on the status of academic reflection itself. I leave you with six 'take-home messages', grouped under '*concept', 'problem', 'diagnosis', 'application', 'challenge'* and *'hope'.*

First. The key concept: academic freedom

'Academic freedom' is related to *'freedom of speech'*, but not identical. '*Freedom of speech'* protects everyone's right to express ideas publicly. *'Academic freedom'* applies specifically to scholars and guarantees the autonomy to teach, communicate, investigate, and publish without external interference. It relies on '*freedom of speech'* but goes further by ensuring methodological independence and truth-seeking within professional standards. '*Academic freedom'* is not there to simply represent the diversity that lives in the society. Both freedoms have their limits. '*Free speech'* is bounded by law, for example those concerning hate speech, while '*academic freedom'* is shaped and filtered by disciplinary norms, evidence-based reasoning, peer review, and ethical responsibilities. Academia requires duties and virtues such as integrity, openness, and rejection of proselytism. There is no place for liars or for so-called '*bullshit merchants'* who don't care about the truth.

Second. Sketching the problem: universities lean left and are threatened by the right

ANDREAS DE BLOCK showed that faculty attitudes, curricula, and campus culture lean strongly toward left-liberal or progressive ideas. Universities risk becoming ideological monocultures where debate narrows and students may feel pushed toward a single worldview. Indicators include (1) the *strong liberal–conservative imbalance* among faculty, especially in humanities and social sciences; (2) the rise of *gender, postcolonial,* and *critical race programs*; and (3) *activism and subtle cancel culture* that avoids controversial speakers and normalizes the idea that students need protection from ideas. If there's a progressive dominance, it means that their values will disproportionally impact scientific questions, concepts, micro-decisions, research interpretations, peer reviews, management of risks, etc. Recent pro-*Palestina protests* at universities illustrate how activism can spill over into demands that challenge institutional neutrality and academic freedom. Academics sometimes are the aggressors.

Academic freedom, however, is not only challenged from within; it also faces pressure from the political right. The TRUMP administration's opposition to DEI-programs is a case in point. TRUMP sees these programs promoting a disturbing '*woke ideology'* rather than a '*merit-based'* principle, and he puts U.S. universities under pressure to dismantle them. One might say that they simply promote affirmative actions for conservatives.

So, 'academic freedom' seems to be squeezed in two ways. Put to the extreme: *'Left cancel culture'* implies that one is not allowed to say some things, but the '*TRUMPEAN/ORBEAN answer'* is simply a 'shut up!' (FASSIN) At the same time we must acknowledge that when academia is under threat, this is part of a larger threat of anti-intellectualism. AI may add to this, as it may further corrode the value of degrees.

Third. This problem leads to a specific diagnosis: a wrong academic ethos

Conservatives argue that universities have become ideological monocultures. Progressives claim this critique is exaggerated or politically driven. In their view, attacks on '*woke universities'* mainly serve a conservative agenda rather than it reflects an academic reality. They feel that some disciplines are being ridiculed.

When universities, however, cease to be open marketplaces of ideas, they fall under what we might call a '*wrong academic ethos'*, which is the inclination to close the windows rather than to open them. The intellectual climate becomes narrow and self-referential. This 'wrong ethos' is reinforced not only by rules or incentives but also by strong social pressures, wat could be called the *'tyranny of the majority'*. Here, self-selection seems to be the key, which results in (active) discrimination against conservative people/ideas. So, even without censorship, academics may silence themselves out of fear of backlash, reputational harm, or social isolation. This leads to:

1. *Intellectual homogeneity:* too little diversity of views limits the debate.
2. *Self-censorship*: people adapt or soften opinions, research findings, or proposals.
3. *Research bia*s: politically sensitive topics are avoided which weakens debate and hampers public trust.
4. *Education as activism*: critical thinking changes into ideological instruction.

Fourth. The application

To understand the wrong ethos, I think one must consider three models of intellectual space: safe, brave, and safe-enough.

- **Safe space:** It works like a protectionist market, as it shields people from discomfort. Emotional safety outweighs intellectual confrontation. If also students, for example, expect permanent protection, professors may avoid controversial topics out of fear of negative evaluations or reputational harm. This '*pedagogical safetyism'* is fuelled by the fear of the growing juridification, economisation and bureaucratisation of academia. Everyone, including students, then misses opportunities to develop resilience and to sharpen arguments through genuine disagreement.

- **Brave space:** Like in an unregulated marketplace, there are no filters, no protections, but there is only raw competition. All viewpoints are equally welcome, even unsettling ones. Both students and academics must resist shielding themselves from challenging perspectives. However, just like the safe space, this *'tough climate'* has risks as some voices may stay silent, fearing that they will be mocked, or that disagreement could harm collegial ties or career prospects. The structural precarity of junior scholars amplifies caution.

- **Safe-enough space:** The middle position. Diverse viewpoints are welcomed within boundaries that prevent intimidation. Debate is encouraged, hostility discouraged. If this space is not genuinely upheld, scholars still retreat into conformity and lose room for intellectual risk-taking.

Fifth. The challenge: "*Never the twain shall meet*"
This brings me to the challenge: how to create *'safe-enough spaces'*. That's not easy as universities operate within *neoliberal models* focused on publish-or-perish, metrics-driven research, funding, rankings, evaluations, which makes risky or controversial research less attractive. Meanwhile, academics have become increasingly specialised. As JOSÉ ORTEGA Y GASSET warned, *hyper specialisation* can make scholars '*barbaric*' to anything outside their corner. Intellectual tribes emerge, windows close further, and journals and conferences become echo rooms. PETER SINGER'S *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, which allows anonymous publications for the sake of dissent, is a striking symptom of this fragmentation.

Six. The hope: "*It's the collective, not the individual that counts!*"
In reality, some scholars adopt fixed or *activist stances*. Individual activism is tolerable, but too much can undermine academic freedom. It can also reinforce *confirmation bias* and may conflict with truth-seeking. On the other hand, different biases can balance each other, creating a productive tension. Here, it's important to say that science is a *collective enterprise*. It depends on the integrity of knowledge, not on individual convictions. As such, universities should be evaluated as *neutral systems* rather than through individual examples. Universities should guarantee equal opportunities for all voices and avoid taking an institutional position. Their role is to provide a neutral space, not prescribe individual viewpoints. If universities wish to remain open arenas for truth-seeking, they must at least:

- encourage intellectual diversity in hiring;
- promote open dialogue through safe-enough spaces;
- protect academic freedom from political pressure;
- counter undue (physical) interference; and
- finance controversial but important research.

So, these were my 6 reflections. I hope they were a helpful round-up… There is still a lot of food for thought, but luckily, we can now head to the reception for some real food. 😊