

Article

Academic Freedom, No-Platforming, and Appeals to “Disciplinary Competence”: A Critical Analysis of Simpson–Srinivasan’s Arguments †

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† This article contains quite a few long substantive footnotes, which introduce material that I think is important but which would be too much of a digression to include in the main text. Some readers may wish to skip those footnotes on a first reading, and come back to them later.

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Abstract: I critically assess [Simpson and Srinivasan’s \(2018\)](#) defense of some instances of no-platforming at universities. I raise, and then analyse, three questions: What does it mean for a once-controversial issue to be “settled”? What should be done when two or more academic disciplines come to different judgments about the competence of a scholar or the admissibility of a set of ideas? Which fields of inquiry qualify as genuine academic disciplines? In all three cases I contend that epistemic criteria must be paramount, and sociological criteria secondary. I illustrate, with explicit examples, some of the ways in which purported judgments concerning “disciplinary competence” or appeals to “settled science” can be employed to disguise what is in fact the suppression of dissident views on nakedly ideological grounds.

Keywords: no-platforming; academic freedom; freedom of debate

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It is widely understood and accepted that the concepts of freedom of expression and of academic freedom overlap but are not identical.¹ In broad terms, freedom of expression is a general moral right, and in most jurisdictions also a legal right, that belongs to all

¹ For a variety of views on the relation between academic freedom and freedom of speech, see, for instance, [Van Alstyne \(1972\)](#), [Dworkin \(1996, chapter 11\)](#), [Post \(2012\)](#), [Fish \(2014\)](#), [Chemerinsky and Gillman \(2017\)](#), [Simpson \(2020\)](#), [Beaud \(2021\)](#), [Evans and Stone \(2021\)](#), [Reichman \(2021\)](#).

people, concerning their expression on all subjects.² Academic freedom, by contrast, is a concept that is more limited in scope but potentially merits an enhanced level of protection: it belongs to lecturers, researchers and (to some extent, I would also argue) students and concerns their expression on academic subjects – primarily though not exclusively within their domains of professional expertise – as well as on related social and political issues, and issues concerned with the management of their universities.³

In a recent article, Robert Simpson and Amia Srinivasan (2018) have appealed to the distinction between freedom of speech and academic freedom in order to defend – within a liberal political philosophy and forgoing any appeal to “harm”, invoking instead the grounds of disciplinary (in)competence – some instances of *no-platforming*: that is, “blocking, or attempting to block, an individual from speaking at a university because of her expressed moral or political views”.⁴ Here I would like to subject their arguments to closer scrutiny, and to illustrate, with explicit examples, some of the ways in which purported judgments concerning “disciplinary competence” or appeals to “settled science” can be employed to disguise what is in fact the suppression of dissident views on nakedly ideological grounds.

The plan of this article is as follows: After some preliminary discussion concerning the meaning and scope of academic freedom, I address the specific claims of Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) concerning the situations that could, in their view, justify no-platforming. I raise, and then analyse, three questions: What does it mean for a once-controversial issue to be “settled”? What should be done when two or more academic disciplines come to different judgments about the competence of a scholar or the admissibility of a set of ideas? Which fields of inquiry qualify as genuine academic disciplines, for the purpose of applying the principles of academic freedom? I conclude by addressing the issue “Why does it matter?”, setting forth a number of reasons why the curtailment of debate along the lines endorsed by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) is harmful to society, and dangerous above all to the scholarly enterprise.⁵

It may perhaps be helpful to the reader if I set forth at the outset the general philosophical framework within which I will be arguing. I shall be accepting Simpson and Srinivasan’s (2018) framing of the issues and shall thus be arguing, as they do, within a liberal political philosophy. I shall also be adopting their liberal justification for academic

² See Howard (2024) for an informative survey of theories of freedom of expression, with extensive references. It goes without saying that the legal right to free expression is heavily circumscribed in some jurisdictions and is completely denied (in practice if not in theory) in others. In this article I shall be concentrating on the philosophical issues, and shall mention legal issues only in passing.

³ It goes without saying that theorists have produced many different versions of the precise scope of academic freedom and of the philosophical justifications for it. See, for instance, the collections of essays: Pincoffs (1975), Menand (1997), Bilgrami and Cole (2015), Downs and Surprenant (2018), Lackey (2018), De Gennaro, Hofmeister and Lüfter (2022), Watermeyer, Raaper and Olssen (2022).

⁴ This definition is taken from the first sentence of their article at PhilPapers. The earlier book version of their article omits the phrase “or attempting to block”. I do not know whether this discrepancy is intended to have any deeper significance, or which version the authors would consider to be definitive.

⁵ Previous commentary on Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) includes Shahvisi (2018), Danaher (2019), Marsh (2019), Couto (2021), Peters and Nottelmann (2021), Stangroom (2021), Veber (2021), Tadros (2022), Elford (2023), Lang (2023) and Adenitire (2024). None of these articles address, except in passing, the principal issues raised here. These issues were discussed briefly by Suissa and Sullivan (2021, pp. 71–75); my analysis here builds on theirs, and provides further details of both theory and specific case studies.

The Simpson–Srinivasan (2018) article was also plagiarised by Aydemir (2019).

freedom, which is founded on a conception of scholarship and university teaching as committed to an honest search for truth, a respect for evidence and reasoned argument, and the valuing of good-faith debate and viewpoint diversity. That understanding of academic freedom, and its substantive content, form the subject of the next section.

1. The Meaning of Academic Freedom

Before discussing the specific arguments of [Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018\)](#) concerning no-platforming, it may be useful to summarise briefly the understanding of academic freedom that is shared, at least in its principal aspects, between them and myself, and which I will be applying in this article. However, I shall stress some points that they don't (methodology vs. content of views, collective vs. individual rights) and address some issues that they don't (mandatory vs. hortatory responsibilities, which domains of inquiry are covered).

The current law in England and Wales – to take one example from the anglophone world – defines academic freedom rather narrowly as

[the] freedom [of academic staff] within the law –

- (a) to question and test received wisdom, and
- (b) to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions,

without placing themselves at risk of being adversely affected [by] ...

- (a) loss of their jobs or privileges at the provider; [or]
- (b) the likelihood of their securing promotion or different jobs at the provider being reduced.⁶

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure is more detailed:

1. Teachers are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results, subject to the adequate performance of their other academic duties ...
2. Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject. ...
3. College and university teachers are citizens, members of a learned profession, and officers of an educational institution. When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline, but their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their

⁶ [Higher Education \(Freedom of Speech\) Act 2023, Section A1\(6,7\)](#); see also [Higher Education and Research Act 2017, Section 14\(7\)](#). The legal definition of academic freedom in Scotland is similar but not identical: [Higher Education Governance \(Scotland\) Act 2016, Section 23](#). In the United States, academic freedom has no specific legal definition but is protected under the First Amendment – to an extent that is hotly debated – by a succession of court decisions: see e.g., [J.P. Byrne \(1989\)](#), [Lee \(2015\)](#), [Rosenthal \(2021\)](#), [Whittington \(2023\)](#), [Rabban \(2024\)](#) for a variety of views. See also [Barendt \(2010\)](#) for a comparative analysis of the legal protection of academic freedom in the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States.

profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others, and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution.

(American Association of University Professors, 1940)

Perhaps the most comprehensive exposition of the substantive content of academic freedom is contained in the Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel, formally adopted by UNESCO in 1997, which defines academic freedom as

the right, without constriction by prescribed doctrine, to freedom of teaching and discussion, freedom in carrying out research and disseminating and publishing the results thereof, freedom to express freely their opinion about the institution or system in which they work, freedom from institutional censorship and freedom to participate in professional or representative academic bodies.⁷

After elaborating on these rights⁸ and adding the right “to take part in the governing bodies and to criticize the functioning of higher education institutions, including their own”⁹, the Recommendation explains that

the exercise of rights carries with it special duties and responsibilities, including the obligation to respect the academic freedom of other members of the academic community and to ensure the fair discussion of contrary views. Academic freedom carries with it the duty to use that freedom in a manner consistent with the scholarly obligation to base research on an honest search for truth. Teaching, research and scholarship should be conducted in full accordance with ethical and professional standards ...¹⁰

These responsibilities are fleshed out in the subsequent paragraphs, and notably include the obligations “to base their research and scholarship on an honest search for knowledge with due respect for evidence, impartial reasoning and honesty in reporting”, “to encourage the free exchange of ideas between themselves and their students”, and “when speaking or writing outside scholarly channels on matters which are not related to their professional expertise, to avoid misleading the public on the nature of their professional expertise”.¹¹

Academic freedom thus differs in significant ways from the general freedom of expression: the two rights run in parallel and often overlap, but they have a different scope and to some extent different objects, and they provide different protections. The general right of freedom of expression protects the expression of ideas, whether or not they are cogent or well-informed, from censorship or punishment by governments. (Here I am referring only to the legal right. Most versions of the moral right to freedom of expression also include some claims against infringement by private parties.) Academic freedom, by contrast, grants to lecturers and scholars specific prerogatives to independently determine

⁷ UNESCO (1997, paragraph 27).

⁸ UNESCO (1997, paragraphs 25, 26 and 28–30).

⁹ UNESCO (1997, paragraphs 31 and 32).

¹⁰ UNESCO (1997, paragraph 33).

¹¹ UNESCO (1997, paragraphs 34(c,a,k) respectively).

their research, and, within disciplinary constraints, their teaching; it protects them (or ought to protect them) not only from governments but also from university administrators, businesses, external pressure groups, students, and in some cases even fellow scholars. As [Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018, p. 197\)](#) say:

The aim of these principles is to ensure, for instance, that donors cannot get professors fired for criticizing foreign governments, that corporations cannot buy influence to quash research that threatens their commercial interests, that governments cannot gag scientists whose research reveals dangers created by government policies, and that administrative staff cannot force teachers to modify their syllabi based on the management's ideas about what should be taught.

Theorists have offered a variety of justifications for the protection of academic freedom¹²; the strongest of these are ultimately epistemic and arise from the mission of the university as a place for “the preservation, advancement, and dissemination of knowledge”.¹³ [Post \(2012, pp. 64–65\)](#) quotes the eloquent formulation of Arthur [Lovejoy \(1930, pp. 384–385\)](#), one of the co-founders of the AAUP:

[The university's] function of seeking new truths will sometimes mean ... the undermining of widely or generally accepted beliefs. It is rendered impossible if the work of the investigator is shackled by the requirement that his conclusions shall never seriously deviate either from generally accepted beliefs or from those accepted by the persons, private or official, through whom society provides the means for the maintenance of universities. ... Academic freedom is, then, a prerequisite condition to the proper prosecution, in an organized and adequately endowed manner, of scientific inquiry ...¹⁴

On this view, academic freedom includes the right of collectivities of scholars (such as university departments) to make academic decisions free from interference by university administrators, governments, and other outsiders; but that is not all. Academic freedom is first and foremost a right belonging to individual scholars, which protects their research (and within some limitations also their teaching) from interference by all outsiders, including their disciplinary colleagues.¹⁵ That right is predicated on scholarly peers'

¹² See footnote 3 above for references.

¹³ [Madsen \(1983, p. 361\)](#), also quoted in [Post \(2012, p. 63\)](#). See also [Saha \(2026\)](#) for a very interesting formulation, based on Jonathan [Rauch's \(2021\)](#) concept of an “epistemic funnel” to explain the collective process of knowledge creation:

At its big end, the funnel must admit a broad range of ideas and propositions. Only those that withstand scrutiny by the “reality-based community” – a social network governed by key rules, norms, and institutions – emerge from the smaller opening at the other end.

Saha argues that “Collapsing the funnel's zones into a single rubric invites conceptual drift and dilutes protection. If academic freedom exists to create the conditions for truth-seeking, its task is precise: Protect the big end of the funnel.” I would, however, add to this a second task: protect the freedom of debate that is necessary for the winnowing process inside the funnel, which guards against the premature acceptance of orthodoxies.

¹⁴ It is clear from the context that Lovejoy is here using the words “science” and “scientific” in the sense of *Wissenschaft* and *wissenschaftlich*, without intending any restriction to the natural sciences. See, for instance, the very first sentence of his article, cited later in this paragraph.

¹⁵ [Saha \(2026\)](#) concurs but goes farther, arguing that “Institutional autonomy is best seen not as a limb of academic freedom but as a separate instrumental good. Autonomous universities are generally

evaluation of the individual's disciplinary *competence*, but not on their agreement with the substantive content of the research or teaching. In Lovejoy's words (1930, p. 384),

Academic freedom is the freedom of the teacher or research worker in higher institutions of learning to investigate and discuss the problems of his science and to express his conclusions, whether through publication or in the instruction of students, without interference from political or ecclesiastical authority, or from the administrative officials of the institution in which he is employed, unless his *methods* [emphasis mine] are found by qualified bodies of his own profession to be clearly incompetent or contrary to professional ethics.

As Simpson and Srinivasan correctly observe, academic freedom does not preclude some forms of "content-based restrictions on communication", such as peer review of journal articles; but it does require "that such constraints serve the promotion of disciplinary knowledge, not some ulterior agenda" (2018, p. 197).

Since both the AAUP and UNESCO mention prominently the responsibilities that go along with the exercise of academic freedom, it is essential to address one key question concerning these responsibilities, which the two documents leave ambiguous. Are these *mandatory* responsibilities, so that failure to fulfill them would cause the person to forfeit in that instance his or her rights of academic freedom? Or are they simply *hortatory*, i.e. goals that every scholar and lecturer should strive to attain?

It seems to me that making these responsibilities mandatory in any more than a minimal sense would defeat the purpose of academic freedom¹⁶, which is to protect the expression of *dissident* views (since mainstream views need no special protection): the defenders of orthodoxy could easily and plausibly label the dissidents as lacking in "impartial reasoning" or as failing to comply with "professional standards" – criteria that are notoriously subjective in application. I would argue that the protection of academic freedom ought to be forfeited only when these scholarly responsibilities have been *unambiguously* and *grossly* violated: for instance, by fraudulent empirical "research", repeated gross misquotation of other scholars, or extreme plagiarism.

One other issue concerns the domains of inquiry within which a lecturer or researcher is entitled to academic freedom. Some versions of academic freedom limit the protection to the area of the academic's professional expertise and competence, or even more restrictively to their area of research.¹⁷ As Murray (2023, footnote 55) points out, on this view "a polymath traditionally working in English might not have AFE [academic free expression] protection for a first peer-review [*sic*] journal article in Mathematics" – a result that he labels (correctly in my view) "an odd conclusion". Or consider an academic whose

better positioned to resist external political pressures on scholarship. Yet when universities come to prize consumer-oriented competition for students, risk-management, and ideological conformity over truth-seeking, autonomy can [in fact] corrode the epistemic funnel."

¹⁶ With one exception: the obligation "to respect the academic freedom of other members of the academic community" should indeed be understood as mandatory. Violation of other people's rights – such as blocking entrance to or exit from a lecture hall – can justly be subject to sanctions, provided that this is done in accordance with clear pre-established rules and pursuant to due process.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the case of *Erdoğan v Turkey* (2014) at the European Court of Human Rights, in which "the highest level of protection under Article 10" of the European Convention on Human Rights – a protection for academic free expression that is stronger than the ordinary (greatly hedged) protection of freedom of expression under Article 10 – was accorded only subject to these constraints. See Murray (2023, sections 4 and 5) for discussion.

formal training and main professional expertise are in Physics and Mathematics but who has written extensively on the philosophy of science and related social issues, and even, on occasion, psychology, law and political philosophy. Should his or her contributions to the latter domains be protected by academic freedom?¹⁸

In my view, the issue of *platforming* (seminar invitations, journal articles, etc.) ought to be determined according to the substantive intellectual content of the contribution, as judged by the scholarly standards of the target discipline, without reference to the author's identity or formal credentials.¹⁹ On the other hand, it seems to me that the legal *protection* for academic freedom ought to apply more widely, subject only to the condition that, in UNESCO's words, "when speaking or writing *outside scholarly channels* on matters which are not related to their professional expertise", the academic must "avoid

¹⁸ One reviewer has pointed out that the toughest case is not an academic who has multiple areas of (possibly uncredentialed) expertise, but rather "the Physics professor who is a Holocaust denier, outside his area of expertise". This is, as readers probably know, (almost) a real-life case: Arthur Butz, a tenured associate professor of Electrical Engineering at Northwestern University, authored a notorious book of Holocaust denial (Butz, 1976/2003). Here I agree with the view of then-Northwestern University president Henry Bienen (2006) that

Like all faculty members, [Butz] is entitled to express his personal views, including on his personal web pages, as long as he does not represent such opinions as the views of the University. Butz has made clear that his opinions are his own and at no time has he discussed those views in class or made them part of his class curriculum. Therefore, we cannot take action based on the content of what Butz says regarding the Holocaust – however odious it may be – without undermining the vital principle of intellectual freedom that all academic institutions serve to protect.

The situation would, of course, be very different if Butz had brought up Holocaust denial in his electrical engineering class. But see Zimmerman (2025) for a dispiriting postscript.

¹⁹ See in particular the mordant comment of Noam Chomsky (1977/1979, pp. 6–7):

In my own professional work I have touched on a variety of different fields. I've done work in mathematical linguistics, for example, without any professional credentials in mathematics; in this subject I am completely self-taught, and not very well taught. But I've often been invited by universities to speak on mathematical linguistics at mathematics seminars and colloquia. No one has ever asked me whether I have the appropriate credentials to speak on these subjects; the mathematicians couldn't care less. What they want to know is what I have to say. No one has ever objected to my right to speak, asking whether I have a doctor's degree in mathematics, or whether I have taken advanced courses in this subject. That would never have entered their minds. They want to know whether I am right or wrong, whether the subject is interesting or not, whether better approaches are possible – the discussion dealt with the subject, not with my right to discuss it.

But on the other hand, in discussion or debate concerning social issues or American foreign policy, Vietnam or the Middle East, for example, the issue is constantly raised, often with considerable venom. I've repeatedly been challenged on grounds of credentials, or asked, what special training do you have that entitles you to speak of these matters. The assumption is that people like me, who are outsiders from a professional viewpoint, are not entitled to speak on such things.

Compare mathematics and the political sciences – it's quite striking. In mathematics, in physics, people are concerned with what you say, not with your certification. But in order to speak about social reality, you must have the proper credentials, particularly if you depart from the accepted framework of thinking. Generally speaking, it seems fair to say that the richer the intellectual substance of a field, the less there is a concern for credentials, and the greater is the concern for content.

misleading the public on the nature of their professional expertise” [emphases mine].²⁰ And even when this latter condition is violated, the expression should of course still be protected by the ordinary legal guarantees for freedom of speech.

But these last two issues are complex, and their further elaboration is beyond the scope of this article.

It is also important to distinguish between a person *having* relevant expertise that justifies the protections of academic freedom, and a person *being recognised as having* such expertise (for instance, through formal credentialing or institutional acknowledgment).²¹ The former criterion is epistemic; the latter is sociological. As I will argue later in this article concerning the closely related issues of the status of academic disciplines and of particular substantive views within them (Sections 3–5), the epistemic criterion is in my view fundamental; the sociological criterion is neither necessary nor

²⁰ UNESCO (1997, paragraph 34(k)). One recent notorious example of “misleading the public on the nature of their professional expertise” is the letter coordinated by the so-called **Feminist Gender Equality Network (2024)** and signed by 271 people (mostly academics), criticising the Cass Review of gender-identity services for children and young people (Cass, 2024) as follows – a letter written a mere 3 days after the 388-page report was released:

As a network of expert feminist academics and stakeholder groups who work on gender diversity, we are dismayed at the recommendations of the Cass Review (2024) for NHS provision of gender identity services for children and young people. The Feminist and [sic] Gender Equality Network urges the NHS not to act on these recommendations.

We suggest that the Cass Review contains unsound methodology, unacceptable bias, and unsupported conclusions. As academics and experts in the field, we regard The Cass Review as potentially harmful to trans children.

As academics with a wealth of research experience between us, we can confidently say that The Cass Review is an inadequate piece of research. Its methodology is unsatisfactory and unreliable.

...

Putting aside the claim, later in the letter, that the Cass Review disregarded all research evidence other than double-blind trials – a claim that is blatantly false, as anyone reading the report and its associated systematic reviews can easily verify – the letter-writers have grossly misled the public about the nature of their “wealth of research experience”. The signatories come overwhelmingly from humanities and social-science departments, notably with specializations in gender studies and queer studies; no more than a handful of them have any expertise in medicine, psychiatry, statistics, or indeed in any field of science. (I was too lazy to look up all 271 signers, but I did look up the first 50: there was one medical general practitioner, one mental health nurse, one tutor in public health, two neuroscientists, three working in various areas of psychology, one professor of food physics, and one graduate student in chemistry. Hardly a “wealth of research experience” as “experts in the field” of gender medicine.)

Ironically, the principal organiser of this letter, Natacha Kennedy, recently criticised unnamed gender-critical activists for their supposed “misuse of academic status ... when they are actually writing quite a long way outside their specialism” (Kennedy, 2024, 45:17).

Let me stress that I have no objection whatsoever to people speaking or writing outside their area of primary expertise (see the comment of Noam Chomsky cited in footnote 19); I myself have done so repeatedly (and am doing so now). Quite simply, each intervention must be evaluated solely on its intellectual merits according to the scholarly standards of the target discipline, without regard to the author’s formal credentials or lack thereof. But I do object – as UNESCO also does – to people blatantly misrepresenting their “wealth of research experience” as supposed “experts in the field”. See also footnote 67 below.

²¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

sufficient for demonstrating the relevant expertise, though it can often serve as a rough initial indicator of probable epistemic status.²²

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between two faces of “expertise”: namely, expertise meriting the *protection* of academic freedom, and (real or alleged) expertise invoked for the purpose of *disqualifying others* from expressing their views within the academic community (through claims of “disciplinary incompetence”). For the reasons mentioned earlier concerning the protection of dissident views, I would argue that “expertise” should be interpreted broadly in the first case (including accepting the sociological criterion as sufficient but not necessary, despite what has just been said) and narrowly in the second (insisting on a strict application of the epistemic criterion).²³

Finally, since the focus of [Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018\)](#) is on no-platforming at universities, I shall henceforth restrict my discussion to expression in university contexts – on campus or in scholarly journals – and shall refrain from addressing the more delicate issues concerning the proper scope of protection for so-called “extramural” speech.²⁴

2. Simpson and Srinivasan on No-Platforming

[Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018, p. 189\)](#) begin their analysis of academic freedom by pointing out, quite correctly, that “the academy is not the public square, and is in fact by its very nature an institution in which content-based speech discrimination is the norm”. More precisely,

in the public square we tolerate the speech of flat-earth cranks, shills paid to undermine climate science, and revisionist historians who espouse conspiratorial misreadings of the evidence. As long as they don’t harass anyone we let them say their piece. But such people aren’t owed an opportunity to teach History 101 or publish in scientific journals ... It is permissible for disciplinary gatekeepers to exclude cranks and shills from valuable communicative platforms in academic contexts, because effective teaching and research requires that communicative privileges be given to some and not others, based on people’s disciplinary competence.

This is what justifies academic disciplines in amplifying the speech of experts and marginalizing the speech of non-experts. These processes are ubiquitous and routine. The professoriate decides which candidates have earned doctoral credentials. Editors of journals and academic presses exercise discretionary judgment to decide whose work will be published. ...

...

²² Along the same lines, a consensus within a scholarly community on the validity of a particular proposition can provide *defeasible* evidence of epistemic warrant, *provided that* the methodology employed by that scholarly community is itself epistemically justified in the sense that it leads fairly reliably, even if not infallibly, to true conclusions. See Section 5 for further discussion of the epistemic analysis of the “distinct disciplinary methods” employed by scholarly communities.

²³ This issue will arise again in Section 5, where I will defend the academic freedom of scholars in Gender Studies while questioning some of their epistemic *bona fides*. And I will also (in footnote 74) defend the academic freedom of postmodern skeptics about truth, despite the fact that their own philosophical claims undermine the usual justifications for academic freedom.

²⁴ Many commentators, starting with [Van Alstyne \(1972\)](#), have observed that the issue of extramural speech is the most contentious part of the AAUP definition of academic freedom. See e.g., [Whittington \(2019\)](#) and [Reichman \(2022\)](#) for further discussion.

... It is no intrinsic affront to the intellectual culture of the university ... that a person should be deprived of a platform to express her views because of a negative appraisal of her credibility and the content of her views. (2018, pp. 195–196, 198)

This is true, as far as it goes (except for the potentially misleading reference to “the content of her views”, see below). Biology departments do not habitually invite creationists, and history departments do not habitually invite Holocaust deniers, because those people in most cases (though not all) lack competence in the field in question and employ methodologies that clash with those of the field in question (for instance, appealing to sacred Scripture rather than to observation and experiment). As Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 199) observe,

The Holocaust denier flouts the *epistemic and methodological* norms that govern historical inquiry. The oil company shill flouts the *epistemic and methodological* norms that govern inquiry in climate science and related disciplines. [emphases mine]

Here Simpson and Srinivasan make clear their understanding that universities decline to invite these individuals because of the poor quality of the evidence and reasoning that they present, as judged by the epistemic and methodological norms of the discipline – *not* because of “the content of [their] views” *per se*.²⁵

The centrality of epistemic and methodological norms in academic judgments concerning platforming has also been stressed by Humphrey Allen (2024), who argues that

Liberalism with respect to academia is committed to pursuing, as opposed to merely reciting, the truth ... This means that academic work can only be judged on its capacity to get to the truth, not on whether or not it expounds a certain view ... On a liberal framework, poorly argued views should not be platformed, even if they are true. Views that are well argued should be platformed, even if they are false. ... Liberals could accept the no-platforming of people who violate “methodological and epistemic norms”, but not the no-platforming of people who have the wrong views.

Here Allen is pointing out, first of all, that upholding reliable methods for discovering what is true is of paramount importance to the academic enterprise. Therefore, not

²⁵ This emphasis on epistemic and methodological norms accords with Lovejoy’s (1930, p. 384) reference, in defining academic freedom, to the *methods* employed by the scholar, as opposed to the content of the views expressed (see Section 1 above).

Of course, the substantive content of a person’s views can sometimes be used, especially in extreme cases, as a rough-and-ready *proxy* for epistemic and methodological evaluation – though not more than that. For instance, a person claiming that the Earth and all biological species on it were created in roughly their present forms sometime in the last 10,000 years – in the face of overwhelming evidence from geology and paleontology to the contrary – would rightly be suspected of flouting the epistemic and methodological norms of the natural sciences. On the other hand, if that person were known to be (or at least to have been at some time in the past) a competent biologist, then one might wish to take a (brief) second look, in order to ascertain whether the person’s new view results from a (possibly religious) conversion to new epistemic and methodological criteria (contradicting the accepted norms of the natural sciences), or rather arises from some new and potentially interesting evidence or arguments. In the latter case, platforming would be an appropriate choice, and indeed a wise one, even if the substantive claims turn out (as is overwhelmingly likely) to be false: see Mill’s second, third and fourth reasons in favor of robust debate, discussed in Section 6 below.

any old methodological norms will suffice; rather, those norms need to be genuinely truth-conducive. The criteria are thus epistemic, not sociological. (See Sections 5 and 7 for further discussion of this issue.) High methodological rigor does not, of course, *guarantee* that the resulting conclusions will be true, but it does make it more likely; and conversely, faulty methodology makes it much more likely that the research will come to erroneous conclusions.

But secondly – and no less importantly – Allen is observing that cogent argumentation is valuable even if the conclusions argued for turn out to be false (see Mill’s second, third and fourth reasons in favor of robust debate, in Section 6 below); and that, by contrast, poor arguments in favor of true conclusions simply muddy the waters and are very likely counterproductive. The criterion for platforming within academia ought to be the quality of the arguments and evidence adduced, as judged by the epistemic and methodological norms of the discipline, *not* the judges’ agreement with the substantive conclusions. Indeed, as Paul Elbourne (private communication) has stressed to me, adherence to this criterion is essential to the progress of scholarship, for otherwise it would be impossible to overturn erroneous but widely accepted ideas. Furthermore, Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 200) themselves stress this distinction between methods and substantive views – and its implications for who should be platformed and who should not – when they give the example of an economist who opposes progressive welfare.²⁶

But this important distinction between methodology and substantive views is soon forgotten by Simpson and Srinivasan, as we shall see. Starting from the just-cited observations about Holocaust deniers and the like, they venture – albeit gingerly – into deeper waters, when they discuss the no-platforming of feminist Germaine Greer at Cardiff University in 2015 because her views were allegedly “transphobic”.²⁷ On the one hand, they disapprove of this no-platforming on the grounds that

Disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that are heavily influenced by feminist theory are riven by deep theoretical divides, not just over the question of whether trans women meet the necessary metaphysical conditions (whatever they may be) to properly count as women, but also over whether that question is a legitimate object of inquiry. Some scholars with apparent institutional and disciplinary credibility – in fields like cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, gender studies, and queer studies – will insist that the questions of what a woman is and whether trans women qualify are central to feminist inquiry. Other scholars in those same fields, with similar credentials, will insist that the question has been settled and is no longer reasonably treated as open to inquiry. ... The fact that there is live controversy over the relevant standards in the relevant disciplines suggests, on its face, that there are not any authoritative disciplinary standards that can be invoked in order to characterize Greer’s no platforming as a case of someone being excluded for lacking disciplinary competence. (2018, pp. 200–201)

²⁶ “Consider ... the example of an economist who opposes progressive welfare. Assume that this speaker is a proficient practitioner of her discipline; while many economists reject her views, nearly all of them accept that she is methodologically competent and that her views should be taken seriously. The no platforming of this speaker ... would ... undermine the integrity of teaching and research in the discipline, by treating as ‘beyond the pale’ a view that, according to the discipline’s own standard-bearers, remains viable.” (2018, p. 200)

²⁷ See Sokal (2022) for a brief discussion of uses and misuses of the word “transphobic”.

But then they go on immediately to say that

disciplinary controversies sometimes resolve. At some point it may cease to be a matter of controversy – among experts with broadly comparable credentials in relevant disciplines – whether Greer’s view represents some kind of failure of disciplinary competence. If ascendant trends in feminist theory continue, it is possible that Greer’s trans-exclusionary [*sic*²⁸] views might one day be rejected by all credentialed experts in the relevant humanities or social science disciplines. (2018, p. 201)²⁹

And in that case, they imply, the denial of a platform to Greer would be justified.

Please note, first of all, that this last comment – which constitutes the heart of Simpson and Srinivasan’s case for no-platforming – conflates methodology with substantive views, and effects a subtle and unargued shift from the former to the latter.³⁰ Furthermore, this comment now substitutes a *sociological* criterion (“rejected by all credentialed experts”) for the *epistemic and methodological* criteria that were previously avowed to be fundamental.

We therefore need – it seems to me – to slow down, and to grapple with these two distinctions more carefully. In particular, we need to address three questions:

1. Which fields of inquiry (or university departments) *qualify* as genuine academic disciplines, for the purpose of applying the principles of academic freedom? Are the criteria sociological, or epistemic and methodological, or both?
2. What should be done when two or more academic disciplines come to different judgments about the competence of a scholar or the admissibility of a set of ideas?

²⁸ See Lawford-Smith (2022, pp. 115–116) for a refutation of the claim that gender-critical feminism is “trans-exclusionary”.

²⁹ Suissa and Sullivan (2021, p. 72) make the important observation that “The list of disciplines deemed here to have a stake in these questions [“cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, gender studies, and queer studies”] is remarkably narrow, with the notable omissions of biology, history and economics.” And as Matthew Kramer (private communication) has pointed out to me, “Equally amazingly, psychology is omitted.”

³⁰ Indeed, just a few paragraphs after the comment about the economist who opposes progressive welfare (footnote 26 above) – and subsequently throughout the article – Simpson and Srinivasan take for granted that no-platforming based on the substantive content of the views is justifiable on liberal grounds, and that academic disciplines are entitled to establish “axiomatic commitments” (201) as part of the definition of disciplinary competence (see Section 5 below for further discussion of this latter issue) and moreover to “exclude[] ... dissenting voices” (203) – “not”, they claim, “in *violation* of principles of academic freedom, but – as with the exclusion of incompetent historical revisionists, or pseudoscientific charlatans – in a way that is partly backed by those principles” (203, emphasis in the original).

Allen (2024) argues that this elision of methods with substantive views is a “sleight of hand”: the reference to methodology “functions as a decoy to try and keep liberals onside”, while

The view Simpson and Srinivasan’s article really pushes is that which comes out in their treatment of Greer, where they argue for restrictions on expression based on academics’ viewpoints. This is totally different from restrictions based on methodological and epistemic norms, and is incompatible with liberalism. ... Relying on the ambiguity of “content-based restrictions”, Simpson and Srinivasan give the impression that their framework is liberal, and rooted in ordinary university practices, when in fact it is neither.

I am very grateful to Humphrey Allen for drawing my attention to Simpson and Srinivasan’s elision of methodology with substantive views.

3. What does it mean for a once-controversial issue to be “settled”?

I propose to address these issues in reverse order, using the concrete example introduced by Simpson and Srinivasan – the no-platforming of gender-critical feminists – as a particularly well-documented test case.

3. What Does It Mean for a Controversy to Be “Settled”? Ideological Censorship Masquerading as Disciplinary Standards

It is important, I contend, to distinguish between situations that are sociologically analogous but epistemically different. Consider the following two cases:

- Biology departments in the Western world today do not habitually invite creationists to give seminars.
- Biology departments in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when Lysenko was in power, did not habitually invite geneticists to give seminars.

In both cases, the out-group was no-platformed because their theoretical and methodological commitments contradicted those of the in-group. That is the sociological commonality. But the epistemic status of the two cases is radically different. Biology departments in the Western world today decline to invite creationists because there has been, over the past two centuries, free and open debate about geology, paleontology and cosmology, and it is by now firmly established that the earth is several billion years old, not several thousand; that biological species, including humans, have evolved; and that Darwin’s theory of natural and sexual selection gives a broadly correct explanation of that evolution. Biology departments in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s and early 1950s, by contrast, declined to invite geneticists because Lysenko’s anti-Mendelian views were the official party line, and anyone who dared to disagree with that party line would be fired, imprisoned or shot.³¹

So now we have to ask: Suppose that, at some point in the (probably very near) future, “all credentialed experts” in Women’s Studies or Gender Studies³² come to agree that sex is a social construction, not a biological fact, and that sex is a “spectrum”, not binary or almost-binary. Would that situation be more analogous to biology departments

³¹ Medvedev (1969), Joravsky (1970), Graham (1987, chapter 4), Soyfer (1994), Kremmentsov (1997, especially chapters 3 and 5–8), Roll-Hansen (2005), Roll-Hansen (2008), Pringle (2008), deJong-Lambert and Kremmentsov (2017), Borinskaya, Ermolaev and Kolchinsky (2019), Gordin (2022). The arrests and executions of geneticists occurred principally during Stalin’s purges of the late 1930s and early 1940s. After the 1948 prohibition of genetics – officially declared to be a bourgeois pseudoscience – recalcitrant geneticists were demoted or fired but not usually worse.

³² Though I am here referring jointly to Women’s Studies and Gender Studies, it is important to recognise that the two fields represent overlapping but distinct intellectual currents, linked by a complex history. Women’s Studies began in the 1960s and 1970s in response to the fact that mainstream disciplines at that time often ignored women’s issues; it attracted scholars from a wide spectrum of academic disciplines and was often organised bureaucratically as an interdisciplinary programme, not a full-fledged department with hiring power. Furthermore, Women’s Studies was ideologically diverse, bringing together liberal, radical, socialist and postmodernist feminists and encompassing a wide range of opinions on divisive issues such as prostitution and pornography. Gender Studies, by contrast, gradually began to supplant Women’s Studies starting in the 1990s (even when programmes retained their old names), as poststructuralist perspectives became dominant and queer theory became quasi-hegemonic. I thank Alice Sullivan for drawing my attention to this issue.

in the Western world today, or to biology departments in the Soviet Union in the 1940s and 50s?

Let me concede at the outset that there are some obvious and important differences between Judith Butler and Trofim Lysenko.³³ Butler's disciples are not sending gender-critical feminists to the gulags – not yet, at least.³⁴ So their *methods* for enforcing the party line are somewhat gentler. (By “party line” I mean an orthodoxy that is imposed within a particular community for *non-epistemic* reasons, and to which dissent is forbidden or severely punished.) But overwhelming evidence indicates that there *is* a party line – not a free and open debate – and the loud calls for no-platforming are one manifestation of that, among many others.³⁵

A recent example of this party line in action was the decision of the American Anthropological Association and Canadian Anthropology Society to cancel a panel scheduled for their November 2023 joint meeting, entitled “Let’s talk about sex, baby: Why biological sex remains a necessary analytic category in anthropology”³⁶, on the grounds that

it relied on assumptions that run contrary to the settled science in our discipline, framed in ways that do harm to vulnerable members of our community. It commits one of the cardinal sins of scholarship – it assumes the truth of the proposition that it sets out to prove, namely, that sex and gender are simplistically binary, and that this is a fact with meaningful implications for the discipline. ([American Anthropological Association, 2023](#))

In fact, this rejection document repeatedly conflates sex (a biological concept) with gender (a social concept or array of concepts), thereby rendering its own argumentation an incoherent muddle. As for the accusation that the session was built on the presumption that “sex and gender are simplistically binary”, the main session organizer, Kathleen Lowrey, noted ([Lowrey, 2023a](#)) that

This latter statement could be read in two ways, both of which misrepresent our panel. Did the AAA intend to suggest we think sex and gender are “binary” in the sense of being two entirely distinct things – sex or gender – with no entanglements? Or does the AAA mean to suggest we think sex and gender are “binary,” in the sense that sex is male or female, and gender is either masculine or feminine? The one way you cannot interpret the sentence is in a manner that conveys what we actually *do* think:

³³ I stress that my use of Butler's name in parallel with Lysenko's is aimed only at personifying, in an entertaining way, the analogy between (some aspects of) the two academic communities. I do not mean to imply that Butler wields any *power* over her followers in Gender Studies (in stark contrast to the power that Lysenko wielded over Soviet agronomy and biology); she is merely an academic and cultural superstar and iconic personality, not the head of any institution.

³⁴ This sentence was of course intended as sardonic; but after writing it I learned that at least one group of Butler's young disciples *has* proposed sending gender-critical feminists (a.k.a. TERFs) to the gulags ([Sawer & Boycott-Owen, 2018](#); [Woolcock & Bannerman, 2018](#)).

³⁵ For other evidence, see for instance [Stock \(2019\)](#), [BBC \(2020\)](#), [Lawford-Smith \(2020\)](#), [LSE \(2021\)](#), [Reindorf \(2021\)](#), [Suissa and Sullivan \(2021\)](#), [Favaro \(2022\)](#), [Suissa and Sullivan \(2022\)](#), [Widdowson \(2022\)](#), [Benjamin \(2023\)](#), [A. Byrne \(2023\)](#), [Carrell \(2023\)](#), [Grove \(2023\)](#), [Lawford-Smith \(2023b\)](#), [Özkırımlı \(2023\)](#), [Palmer \(2023\)](#), [Phoenix v Open University \(2024\)](#), [Phoenix \(2024\)](#), [Wright \(2024b\)](#), [Byrne and Gorin \(2025\)](#), [Sullivan \(2025\)](#), [A. Byrne \(2026a, 2026b\)](#).

³⁶ The title is an allusion to the refrain of the 1990 song “Let’s Talk About Sex” by the American hip-hop trio Salt-N-Pepa.

that biological sex is binary, because humans are a sexually reproducing, sexually dimorphic species; and that gender is, of course, not binary, because it comprises the partially biologically and partially culturally constructed set of systems through which people experience many of the facts of life. [italics in the original]

As Lowrey delicately but mordantly observed,

These developments [conflating sex with gender, and pretending that sex is a “spectrum”] have generated a conceptual tangle in desperate need of unraveling. Happily, this is a task at which anthropology should excel: spotting where the preoccupations of one cultural order – in this case, that of a late-modern, mostly Anglophone, very-online ecumene – are fervently insisted upon by members of that order as constitutive of reality itself.

The rejection document, in its final paragraph, gave away the true reason for cancellation:

Transgender and gender diverse identities have long existed, and we are committed to upholding the value and dignity of transgender people. We believe that a more just future is possible – one where gender diversity is welcomed and supported rather than marginalized and policed.

This ideological motivation was even more explicit in the AAA’s letter to the panelists of the cancelled session:

This decision was based on extensive consultation and was reached in the spirit of respect for our values, the safety and dignity of our members, and the scientific integrity of the program(me). The reason the session deserved further scrutiny was that the ideas were advanced in such a way as to cause harm to members represented by the Trans and LGBTQI of the anthropological community as well as the community at large.³⁷

The invocation of purportedly settled science is thus just a smokescreen; what we have here is manifestly no-platforming just as [Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018\)](#) have defined it: cancellation because the ideas to be expressed are viewed as objectionable on *moral and political* grounds – “No Place For Transphobia in Anthropology”, as the rejection document was revealingly titled.³⁸

Furthermore, [Langlitz \(2023\)](#) and [Gutkin \(2023\)](#) have provided thorough debunkings of the AAA’s claim that its preferred dogma is “settled science”. Indeed, it is no

³⁷ Letter available at [Weiss \(2023\)](#) and [Retraction Watch \(2023\)](#). As biologist Jerry [Coyne \(2023\)](#) acerbically remarked, “the idea of a sex binary was said to be ‘unsafe,’ ‘harmful,’ and ‘undignified.’ That the binary was true apparently didn’t matter. Such is cultural anthropology.”

³⁸ See again [Sokal \(2022\)](#) concerning uses and misuses of the word “transphobic”.

Also enlightening to read is the letter by three prominent anthropologists ([Fuentes et al., 2023](#)) supporting the cancellation. Like the AAA rejection document, this letter begins by invoking “settled science”, and then proceeds to make a mash of that science: conflating the *definition* of sex with observable *markers* of sex; invoking chromosomal patterns other than XX and XY, which represent about 0.1% of humans and are anyway irrelevant to the stated issue of “transgender and gender diverse identities”; and citing reptile species that have intersex genitalia. Need it be pointed out that there are no hermaphrodite mammalian species? [Lowrey \(2023b\)](#) has a trenchant riposte. See also [Clancy et al. \(2024\)](#) and the critical commentary by [A. Byrne \(2024a\)](#).

exaggeration to say that the precise opposite is true: namely, it is well-established science – at least in Biology, if no longer in Anthropology – that sex in all animals is defined by gamete size; sex in all mammals is determined (at least when things go right, which is nearly all the time) by sex chromosomes; there are two and only two sexes, female and male (because there are two and only two types of gametes, namely ova and sperm); and over 99.98% of humans belong unambiguously to one sex or the other. In other words, biological sex in humans is binary in precisely the sense contended by Lowrey (2023a). (See Wright (2024a, 2024c) for a clear explanation of why the 0.02% do not contradict the fact that there are two and only two sexes.) The invocation of “settled science” is thus substantively flawed, besides being a pretext.

Last but not least, it is important to register a warning concerning the potentially dangerous phrase “settled science”. As a matter of principle, *all* results of the empirical sciences (natural as well as social) must be considered to be tentative, incomplete and open to revision in the light of new evidence or cogent new arguments; this is a basic principle in the philosophy of science, known as *fallibilism*.³⁹ Of course, the most well-established aspects of scientific knowledge – such as the fact that biological species have evolved, or the theory of that evolution based on natural and sexual selection – are unlikely to be discarded entirely; but even here, the openness in principle to potentially disconfirming evidence is a central feature of the methodology of science.⁴⁰ Well-established science is at best *provisionally* settled. It is alarming when the phrase “settled science” is employed to *cut off* the discussion of potentially relevant evidence or arguments; and even more so when the “science” in question is in fact very far from being a long-established and firmly-grounded item of knowledge. When such maneuvers are employed, they provide additional evidence for the worry that the field in question may be, at least with regard to the aspect at issue, more akin to Lysenkoism than to genuine science.⁴¹ (See also the discussion of two distinct senses of “settled science”, at the end of Section 6 below.)

Here are a few additional recent examples of ideological censorship (or attempted ideological censorship) masquerading as the neutral application of disciplinary standards. In order to keep this article of manageable length, I refrain from discussing these cases in detail, but refer instead to published accounts that give both sides of each controversy:

³⁹ As Harvey Siegel (1988, p. 108) has observed in the context of science education:

[P]luralist science education ... recognizes that scientific knowledge is never final or certain, but is always subject to amendment and revision on the basis of additional evidence or novel theoretical considerations; that is, pluralism recognizes the fallibility of scientific knowledge. Moreover, pluralism recognizes the virtue and potential fruitfulness of allowing rival ideas to establish their merits in the free exchange of ideas.

The late Susan Haack (1998, p. 95) has illuminatingly analogized science to the problem of completing a crossword puzzle, in which any modification of one word will entail changes in interlocking words; in most cases the required changes will be fairly local, but in some cases it may be necessary to rework large parts of the puzzle. Fallibilism is the idea that it is better to work in pencil than in pen; or “if you must use ink, make sure it’s washable!” (95)

⁴⁰ For examples of this openness, see footnote 25 above and Section 5 below, concerning potential refutations of evolutionary theory; and see the discussion of the Newton–Einstein case at the end of Section 6.

⁴¹ I thank Helen Pluckrose for suggesting that I should stress the importance of fallibilism, and the dangers inherent in the phrase “settled science”.

- The (unsuccessful) campaign for retraction of Rebecca Tuvel's (2017) article in the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*, which explored the analogies between transgenderism and transracialism.⁴²
- The (successful) campaign for retraction of Bruce Gilley's (2017) article "The case for colonialism", which had been published in the *Third World Quarterly*. The retraction was agreed jointly by the author and the editor, not on scholarly grounds, but because of "serious and credible threats of personal violence".⁴³
- The (successful) campaign for the retraction of cardiologist Norman Wang's (2020) article in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, which gave a detailed historical overview of affirmative-action policies in the medical profession in the United States and argued against the continuation of racial and ethnic preferences in medical-school admissions and medical hiring.⁴⁴

⁴² See Wikipedia (2024a) for a detailed history of the controversy, with references to the original documents on both sides. See in particular Weinberg (2017a) and Singal (2017) for detailed refutations of the arguments offered by the advocates of retraction.

⁴³ See Wikipedia (2024b) for a brief history of the controversy, with references to the original documents on both sides; and see Sultana (2018) for the view of the main organiser of the retraction campaign.

Let me stress my strong disagreement with this article's main theses, and my agreement with some of the critiques. But, even so, there are good reasons for the publication of such a thought-provoking though partly flawed article, and even stronger reasons that the proper response is rebuttal, not retraction (Weinberg, 2017b; Flaherty, 2017; Taylor, 2018). See in particular the discussion of John Stuart Mill's second and third reasons, in Section 6 below.

⁴⁴ The official retraction note (Unsigned, 2020) claimed that

the article contains many misconceptions and misquotes and that together those inaccuracies, misstatements, and selective misreading of source materials void the paper of its scientific validity.

but gave only two examples of such flaws: one truncated quotation that is arguably misleading, and one serious misquotation of research results – neither of which is in any way central to the author's argument. (Presumably the editors would have selected, from the "many misconceptions and misquotes ..." that the article allegedly contains, those that most strongly supported their case.) These errors – and other similar errors if there were any – would certainly merit a correction, but would not in normal circumstances justify a retraction (Committee on Publication Ethics, 2015, 2021). However, circumstances in the United States after the brutal police murder of George Floyd were anything but normal; and the real reasons for the retraction quickly became apparent. After the predictable outcry on social media (Phend, 2020), the American Heart Association (2020) issued, a mere three days later, an extraordinarily harsh official statement:

[T]he American Heart Association (AHA) denounces the views expressed in the article and regrets its role in enabling those views to be promoted. Those views are a misrepresentation of the facts and are contrary to our organization's core values and historic commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion in medicine and science. ... We have launched a formal investigation to better understand how a paper that is completely incompatible with the Association's core values was published.

The statement implicitly accused the article's author of "deliberate misinformation [and] misrepresentation" but gave no details. The next day the article was formally retracted (without giving the author any opportunity to respond to the criticisms), along with the above-cited retraction note. The following month, a letter co-signed by the president, immediate past president and president-elect of the American Heart Association (Elkind et al., 2020) repeated that

The AHA explicitly opposes the views in the article as those views are contrary to our core values of inclusion and run counter to long-standing association programs and policies to increase diversity in cardiovascular-related specialties.

- The (unsuccessful) campaign for retraction of Lisa [Littman's \(2018\)](#) article proposing the concept of rapid-onset gender dysphoria. After extensive post-publication peer review, the article was republished ([Littman, 2019b, 2019b](#)) with many clarifications and caveats added but with no change in the results.⁴⁵
- The (successful) campaign for retraction of the [Diaz–Bailey \(2023\)](#) article on rapid-onset gender dysphoria, based on highly dubious criticisms about lack of informed consent, together with the (unsuccessful) campaign for removal of the journal's editor.⁴⁶
- The premature and seemingly authoritative labeling of the laboratory-leak theory of the origins of Covid-19 as an anti-Chinese “conspiracy theory” ([Calisher et al., 2020](#)). This theory is now widely regarded by virologists and epidemiologists as plausible, albeit probably less likely than zoonotic transmission.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the social dynamics of these campaigns for retraction cast additional doubt on the notion that the real issue was disciplinary competence. After all, as [Wight \(2021, p. 444\)](#) points out,

the majority of signatories [of the open letters demanding retraction] had no expertise in the research area [of the work being criticised]. Some had not even read the research and disagreed with the conclusions based on nothing more than social media accounts of the content of the research.

It should be noted, however, that the foregoing cases (excepting the last, which is of a quite different nature) are rather unusual and extreme, because

- (a) they occurred after the article had been accepted for publication and published,
- (b) they involved highly public campaigns – netting hundreds or even thousands of signatures – demanding retraction⁴⁸, and

This letter reiterated the claim that retraction was based on “specific scientific errors as well as misleading and incomplete quotations” but gave no further details. A joint statement by the journal's editors ([Simon et al., 2020](#)) claimed that “the retracted article by Wang misrepresented facts” and asserted, contrary to Wang, that “ample evidence supports the notion that diversity does indeed improve care and outcomes”, citing three studies not cited by Wang; this could certainly justify the publication of a rebuttal article exploring in greater detail this aspect of Wang's argument (which was only one aspect among many), but once again would hardly justify retraction. Finally, in another joint statement ([London et al., 2020](#)), the editors stated that they “sincerely regret the publication of the article” and added:

We are aware that the publication of this flawed and biased article has caused a great deal of unnecessary pain and anguish to a number of parties, and reflects extremely poorly on us. We fully support the retraction of this article.

⁴⁵ The Wikipedia article ([2024c](#)), while somewhat partisan (anti-Littman), gives useful references to both sides of the debate.

⁴⁶ See [Adams et al. \(2023\)](#) for the open letter demanding retraction and removal; and see [Broderick \(2023\)](#) and [Wright \(2023\)](#) for two contrasting analyses of this case.

⁴⁷ See [Wikipedia \(2024d, 2024e\)](#) for a detailed history, with references to the original documents on both sides. The latter article is unfortunately written in a blatantly partisan manner, with repeated references to “conspiracy theories”.

⁴⁸ Rather than the usual scholarly procedure of publishing rebuttal comments by other scholars, together with a reply from the author(s). See [Weinberg \(2017b\)](#), [Flaherty \(2017\)](#), [Savolainen \(2024\)](#) for discussion of this issue; and see [Committee on Publication Ethics \(2021\)](#) for the accepted criteria governing retraction.

(c) the ideological motivations of the would-be censors were fairly obvious, despite their rhetorical appeals to disciplinary standards.

More commonly, however, dissident views will simply fail to see the light of day, because of what one commentator (Savolainen, 2024) has impishly termed “unequal treatment under the law”:

[A] study with methodological limitations is more likely to be called out as flawed if the conclusions offend the reader’s moral sensibility. Likewise, a study with obvious flaws is more likely to pass the peer review and be cited by others if it affirms dominant values. (Savolainen, 2024, 16009)⁴⁹

Savolainen gives examples of both phenomena in contemporary social science, and he observes that this double standard is not unexpected. He cites the perspective of Moral Foundations Theory (Haidt, 2012), according to which “intuitions come first and strategic reasoning second”:

[M]orality is [empirically] primarily about emotions. If we think something is wrong, we feel it in our guts before finding explicit reasons for its wrongness.⁵⁰

Accordingly,

Haidt argues that as a matter of anthropological fact, the human mind has evolved into a relentless advocate when our moral intuitions are challenged. By contrasts [*sic*], we are far more complacent in situations that affirm our values.

Savolainen observes that “this insight has obvious implications for scholarly discourse”, at least “if we are willing to accept the assumption that academics are also humans”:

If Haidt is right, we should expect scholars to respond far more sharply to findings that challenge their moral intuitions as compared to evidence that supports them. We should expect this difference *at equal levels of methodological rigor* given that it is emotions that govern reason and not vice versa. [emphasis mine]⁵¹

But what is normal is not necessarily right:

Although typical for human tribes, partisan behavior [of the type just discussed] violates two important norms of science – *disinterestedness* and *organized skepticism* (Merton, 1968, pp. 612–615) – which require scholars to treat studies the same way regardless of what they discover and to *encourage*, rather than suppress, research that challenges dominant assumptions. (16012, italics in the original)

⁴⁹ For an example of this phenomenon beyond the ones cited by Savolainen, see the methodological criticisms of the Diaz–Bailey (2023) article (footnote 46 above) in Broderick (2023), and the reply by FAIR in Medicine (2023, paragraph beginning “Further, we are aware ...”).

⁵⁰ I have here added the qualifier “empirically” in brackets to stress that Haidt is a social psychologist, not a moral philosopher; he is making an observation about how people empirically *do* make moral judgments, not how they normatively ought to.

⁵¹ Some modest empirical evidence confirming this expectation was obtained in a study of Institutional Review Boards by Ceci et al. (1985), and in studies of peer review by Abramowitz et al. (1975) and Finseraas et al. (2022); see also Inbar and Lammers (2012, pp. 500–501) and Honeycutt and Freberg (2017, pp. 118–119). But see Van Bavel et al. (2020, pp. 68–69) for a critique of the first two of these studies. See also Sakamoto (2017, 8:43–9:49) for a first-person (admittedly anecdotal) narrative concerning “unequal treatment under the law”.

And although Merton and Savolainen are here referring to empirical science (both natural and social), a similar respect for evidence and argument, and for ideas that challenge dominant assumptions, ought to apply also to scholarly fields that are theoretical or interpretive, and even to fields that explicitly address ethical values.

Last but not least, ideological pressure leading to a climate of self-censorship can create a situation in which controversial issues appear to be “settled” when in fact they are not.⁵² In an important recent study, Clark et al. (2025) asked 470 American professors of psychology, in an anonymous online survey, their views concerning ten “taboo propositions”.⁵³ The respondents rated each proposition on a 101-point scale ranging from “100% confident that it is true” to “100% confident that it is false”. For every proposition, some professors reported 100% certainty in its veracity and others reported 100% certainty in its falsity; however, most responses fell near the midpoint, with means mostly in the range 40–60% and standard deviations 25–30%. The authors observed that the large variance “indicat[es] high disagreement” and that the clustering around 50% shows that “the majority of professors had at least some uncertainty. These findings seem to indicate little to no scientific consensus on these conclusions, despite high levels of confidence among some scholars (and in both directions).”⁵⁴

Respondents were then asked how fearful they would be of sharing openly their views on the proposition in question (again on a 101-point scale ranging from “no risk at all” to “very high risk”). Means were mostly in the range 35–50%, with standard deviations 30–40%. This suggests significant self-censorship, again with a very large variance.

⁵² See Loury (1994) and Kuran (1995) for insightful analyses of the dynamics of self-censorship and preference falsification.

⁵³ The “taboo propositions” were:

1. The tendency to engage in sexually coercive behavior likely evolved because it conferred some evolutionary advantages on men who engaged in such behavior.
2. Gender biases are not the most important drivers of the under-representation of women in STEM fields.
3. Academia discriminates against Black people (e.g., in hiring, promotion, grants, invitations to participate in colloquia/symposia).
4. Biological sex is binary for the vast majority of people.
5. The social sciences (in the United States) discriminate against conservatives (e.g., in hiring, promotion, grants, invitations to participate in colloquia/symposia).
6. Racial biases are not the most important drivers of higher crime rates among Black Americans relative to White Americans.
7. Men and women have different psychological characteristics because of evolution.
8. Genetic differences explain non-trivial (10% or more) variance in race differences in intelligence test scores.
9. Transgender identity is sometimes the product of social influence.
10. Demographic diversity (race, gender) in the workplace often leads to worse performance.

⁵⁴ Clark et al. (2025, pp. 946–947). The lowest mean was 21%, and the highest mean was 66%; furthermore, all of the standard deviations were at least 23%. This shows, I think it is fair to say, that *none* of the ten propositions can in any reasonable sense be considered as “settled” in either direction, at least among American professors of psychology.

Furthermore, there was a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.25$ to 0.56 , $p < 0.001$) between belief in the taboo proposition⁵⁵ and self-censorship.

This coupling of social taboo with a climate of self-censorship can lead to a “spiral of silence” (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) in which “individuals who perceive their position to be unsupported – even if they, in fact, constitute a majority – will fall silent, thereby creating the appearance of even less support for the position” (Prentice and Miller, 1996, p. 202). And since, in the academic context, determining whether or not an issue is “settled” will ordinarily rely on the *public* expressions of opinion by experts, an issue can appear to be “settled” even when an anonymous survey of expert opinion would indicate that it is not. Furthermore, the no-platforming of non-mainstream views on purportedly settled questions, as endorsed by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018), would contribute to reinforcing and amplifying this self-fulfilling prophecy: not only by silencing or ostracizing public dissenters, but also, and above all, by inducing the much larger number of scholars who quietly hold qualms about the supposed consensus view to keep their heads safely below the parapet. And although this social dynamic can occur in any field, even the natural sciences⁵⁶, it is understandably most severe on issues with a strong moral valence, for the reasons observed by Savolainen (2024).⁵⁷

In summary: Appeals to “disciplinary competence” or “settled science” as a justification for no-platforming, along the lines advocated by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018), must be evaluated critically and skeptically, for they can serve as a pretext for what is in fact the censorship of ideas that are deemed objectionable on *moral or political* grounds, not epistemic grounds; and this danger is not merely theoretical. (See also the discussion of two distinct senses of “settled science”, at the end of Section 6 below.)

4. Conflicts Between Disciplines

Another issue – which (Simpson and Srinivasan, 2018, pp. 201–203), to their credit, do address, albeit too briefly – concerns “controversies between disciplines”. Even if in the Women’s Studies and Gender Studies departments there is (or soon will be) unanimous agreement that sex is a social construction, in the Philosophy department that claim is vigorously debated, and in the Biology department it is understood to be radically false. Under these conditions, the Women’s Studies and Gender Studies departments would be perfectly entitled not to invite Germaine Greer or Kathleen Stock or Holly Lawford-Smith or Carole Hooven to speak in *their* seminars⁵⁸; but would they have the right to prevent

⁵⁵ Except proposition #3 in footnote 53, which was reverse-coded.

⁵⁶ See e.g., Bricmont (2017, especially Chapter 10) concerning the conceptual foundations of quantum mechanics; and see Danaher (2019, section 2) for an interesting comment on the relevance of this case for the Simpson–Srinivasan (2018) no-platforming argument.

⁵⁷ I am indebted to Abhishek Saha for drawing my attention to the article of Clark et al. (2025) and for pointing out its importance to the question of determining when a scholarly question is “settled”.

Further insights into the dynamics of “prosocial” censorship in the social and natural sciences, with extensive references to relevant prior work, can be found in the recent article of Clark et al. (2024); and insights into the dynamics of “outrage mobs” can be found in Stevens et al. (2020, section 4).

⁵⁸ Whether they would be *wise* in not inviting these thoughtful and eloquent critics of their views to present their arguments is, however, a quite different matter: see Mill’s four reasons in favor of robust debate, to be discussed in Section 6 below.

the Philosophy department, or the Biology department, or a student group from inviting them?⁵⁹

Please note that this reasoning can also go in reverse. The Philosophy department might decline to invite Judith Butler, considering her to be an incompetent philosopher or even a charlatan (Nussbaum, 1999); but would they have the right to prevent the English department, or the Gender Studies department, or a student group from inviting her?⁶⁰

It is unclear whether or not Simpson and Srinivasan endorse cross-disciplinary no-platforming. They say (2018, p. 203) that

One way to address these hard cases [involving conflicts between disciplines] would be to say that any speaker seen as within the bounds of disciplinary competence by *at least one* discipline cannot be legitimately no platformed for the sake of upholding the disciplinary standards of any other discipline. But then the worry is that in protecting the disciplinary integrity of philosophy – as a discipline resistant to seeing *any* views as rationally beyond the pale – we impair other disciplines' attempts to police their own intellectual standards. [italics in the original]

But they leave it there, without pursuing the matter; they do not say whether or not, in their view, Gender Studies' prerogative "to police [its] own intellectual standards" extends to preventing the Philosophy or Biology department from hosting speakers with contrasting views.⁶¹ I submit that an affirmative answer would be a massive abridgment of the academic freedom of the other two disciplines. Furthermore, an affirmative answer, if applied even-handedly, would forbid *all three* departments from inviting speakers on any interdisciplinarily contested question. (Of course, in practice the advocates of no-platforming are not asking for this principle to be applied even-handedly; rather, they are asking for it to be applied to forbid those speakers that *they* want to forbid.) Surely the ethos of a university in a democratic country ought to be exactly the opposite: to encourage interdisciplinary debate and exchange of views, to the benefit of all parties. Of course, some or all parties to the controversy might refuse to participate in such an exchange of views; that is most certainly their right, even if in my opinion it would be an unwise choice and counterproductive to their own best interests.⁶² But that intransigence does not confer on them the moral or legal right to censor speakers invited by other university departments. I would argue that Simpson and Srinivasan's first proposed approach is the correct one: "any speaker seen as within the bounds of disciplinary competence by *at least one* discipline cannot be legitimately no-platformed for the sake of upholding the disciplinary standards of any other discipline".

⁵⁹ See Stock (2021), Lawford-Smith (2022, 2023a), Hooven (2021, 2023).

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Brian Leiter for this observation.

⁶¹ Simpson and Srinivasan do add (2018, p. 203) that "the bare fact that a philosopher might defend the view that *p* should not be seen as implying that other disciplines are unjustified in regarding support for *p* as a mark of disciplinary incompetence". That is true – but disciplinary incompetence *in which field?* Other disciplines could indeed be justified in regarding support for *p* as a mark of disciplinary incompetence *in their own field* (provided that the standards of their field are themselves epistemically sound: see Section 5 below); but that would say nothing about disciplinary incompetence *in another field* (for instance, in Philosophy or Biology). So this remark fails to address the main issue in cross-disciplinary no-platforming, which is not just "who gets to claim and wield disciplinary authority" (203), but also *the extent of the territory* over which that disciplinary jurisdiction is claimed to extend.

⁶² See again Mill's four reasons in favor of the freedom of debate, to be discussed in Section 6 below.

I am not aware of any articles, other than that of Simpson and Srinivasan (2018), that have explicitly addressed, at a theoretical level, the legitimacy of cross-disciplinary no-platforming.⁶³ However, it is clear that, *in practice*, attempts (sometimes successful) at cross-disciplinary no-platforming are ubiquitous. Indeed, as observed previously, in most cases the vast majority of the signatories of petitions demanding no-platforming or retraction not only have no expertise in the specific research area of the impugned seminar presentation or scholarly article, but do not even come from the relevant academic discipline. It is thus urgent for the defenders of no-platforming to address squarely the question of cross-disciplinary no-platforming.⁶⁴

5. Which Fields Qualify as Academic Disciplines?

Finally, there is an important issue that Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) raise, but only in a footnote, and which they do not really address in any detail: namely, the question of “which fields of inquiry qualify as academic *disciplines* properly construed” [emphasis in the original]. After all, they observe,

Special prerogatives are accorded to academics ... because they are required in order for academics to carry out the rigorous, technical, and specialized intellectual practices that are conducive to knowledge-creation within their disciplines. ... [B]eing a *bona fide* discipline in the way that matters is not just about having a nominated field of inquiry and a named department in the university. It is about having distinct disciplinary methods that create knowledge, and merit special protection in view of that achievement. (Simpson and Srinivasan, 2018, p. 202, footnote 30)

They go on to observe, presciently, that

Where there are conflicts between different disciplines – say, conflicts over different methods, or axiomatic commitments – this should only be understood as a *true* conflict if both fields are alike in being able to claim the status of a knowledge-creating discipline in the relevant sense. [*italics in the original*]

But unfortunately they do not pursue the point, which is a fundamental one: Which disciplines are “knowledge-creating”?

As a starting point for this analysis, it is important to observe that “knowledge” here cannot simply mean socially shared belief, for that would be insufficient to justify the special claims made for academic freedom. Rather, “knowledge” must mean – as it traditionally does in the philosophical literature – “justified true belief” or some similar

⁶³ However, Shahvisi (2018, p. 277) has proposed that “perhaps Simpson and Srinivasan’s account could be strengthened by ... wondering which assumptions are morally apposite for interrogation ... I think if this view is taken, Simpson and Srinivasan’s filter can be made to uphold many more cases of no-platforming than they anticipate.” And in a footnote (281, footnote 6) Shahvisi explicitly mentions Rebecca Tuvel and Bruce Gilley (see footnotes 42 and 43 above) as potential candidates for “be[ing] denied platforms in the future”. Since academics from any field can “wonder which assumptions are *morally* apposite for interrogation”, this reasoning provides an implicit rationale for cross-disciplinary no-platforming.

⁶⁴ One particularly stunning type of cross-disciplinary no-platforming occurs when a scholar, scheduled to give a seminar on some non-political subject X (for instance, quantum mechanics or British Romantic poetry), is de-platformed because of his or her actual or alleged views on political issue Y. For examples, see Azcárraga et al. (2019), Powell (2021), Nightingale (2022), Coyne and Boudry (2024), Curlin (2024). Of course, in these cases the issue of “disciplinary competence” does not arise even as a pretext.

concept.⁶⁵ That is an epistemic concept, not a sociological one. It is, for instance, on the grounds of that epistemic criterion that universities nowadays have departments of Astronomy but not departments of Astrology. (And it is why, if you ask me, they should not have departments of Theology: because theology is not a genuine knowledge-creating discipline.⁶⁶ But of course no one asked me.)

So the question now arises: On purely epistemic grounds, are the “distinct disciplinary methods” employed in Gender Studies more akin to those of Astronomy or to those of Astrology (and Theology)? For instance, when questions of fact about the external world are at issue, do gender-studies scholars propose clearly formulated theories and then attempt to test them by gathering empirical data and analysing those data as objectively as possible? Or do they erect controversial propositions as *unimpeachable* truths, and then proceed to deduce their logical consequences?

That question is not just rhetorical (despite my playful and obviously not-literally-intended comparisons with Astrology and Theology); and Simpson and Srinivasan themselves confirm that the second of these alternatives is in fact the case, at least on one question, albeit one that is moral rather than empirical.⁶⁷ They observe (2018, p. 201) that

⁶⁵ I say “or some similar concept” in view of the famous counterexamples of [Gettier \(1963\)](#).

See also [Robertson \(2009\)](#) for an illuminating analysis of the epistemic aims of education in the light of philosophical accounts of, and debates concerning, the nature of knowledge.

⁶⁶ By contrast with History of Religion, Sociology of Religion, Psychology of Religion, Anthropology of Religion, Philology of Religion, Literary Studies of Religion, Economics of Religion, and Philosophy of Religion – all of which *are* genuine knowledge-creating disciplines. (Of course, some university departments may carry for historical reasons the label “Theology” while in fact restricting their research and teaching to these genuine knowledge-creating disciplines. Departments of this kind are of course fully legitimate scholarly enterprises, but for conceptual clarity they should ideally be renamed as “Religious Studies” or something similar.)

⁶⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the approach of Gender Studies to empirical questions; but one indication may perhaps be found in the open letter from the [Feminist Gender Equality Network \(2024\)](#) quoted in footnote 20 above. Contrast also the open letter from a large group of LGBTQ activist organisations and individuals ([GLAAD, 2023](#)) demanding that the New York Times “stop questioning science that is SETTLED” [capitals in the original], with the finding of the Cass Review – commissioned by the UK National Health Service, representing four years of work and informed by six peer-reviewed systematic reviews of evidence – that “This is an area of remarkably weak evidence ... The reality is that we have no good evidence on the long-term outcomes of interventions to manage gender-related distress.” ([Cass, 2024](#), p. 13) See also [Ryan \(2025\)](#).

Remarkably, the Pennsylvania branch of the American Psychological Association has *forbidden* any discussion or mention of the Cass Review on its listserv, alleging (without providing any detail) that the Review “fail[s] to meet PPA’s standard for evidenced-based [*sic*] care” and that “we have many members of the LGBTQIA+ community and its allies who are feeling targeted, harmed, and hurt by this literature being repeatedly shared. ... We will no longer allow discourse that causes harm to our members.” See [Ryan \(2024\)](#) for the full text of this message, which announces a radical form of prospective no-platforming within a professional domain that is closely akin to the university in its proclaimed reverence for evidence and for disciplinary competence; and compare to Mill’s four reasons in favor of free and open debate, discussed in Section 6 below.

Nor is this an isolated incident: in fact, Dr. Cass herself was de-platformed a few months later. She had been invited by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons to participate in a panel at the ASPS’s September 2024 annual meeting (together with a surgeon supporting gender-affirming surgery); but the panel was cancelled after protests from a group of activist surgeons (see [Davis, 2024a](#) for details). “None of the ASPS members grumbling about the cancelation would go on the record to rebuke [Plastic Surgery

In gender studies the moral permissibility of homosexuality is a settled question – one of the *axiomatic* premises that sets a foundation for the kind of inquiry that scholars in this discipline undertake. Anyone who wanted to argue against the moral permissibility of homosexuality would be setting themselves outside the *axioms* that define the field of gender studies. [emphases mine]

This is, I contend, a shocking admission. Though I personally am convinced that homosexuality, bisexuality and heterosexuality among consenting adults are all equally morally permissible, that conclusion rests on my evaluation of the competing arguments; it would be obtuse of me to pretend that there are *no* arguments on the other side. One must wonder about the epistemic status of a discipline in which propositions that are historically highly controversial – and indeed are still highly controversial in many parts of the world – are considered to be settled, not by reasoned argument, but *axiomatically*.⁶⁸

Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 201) attempt to legitimate the erection of controversial propositions into axioms by citing Michele Moody-Adams (2015, p. 106):

Communities of academic inquiry are constituted by exclusionary practices ... and standards of argument and inquiry evolve as shared understandings that are internal to these exclusive “communities of the competent”. These shared understandings involve the notion that some ways of arguing, and some points of view, are simply not worthy of recognition within the community of inquiry. A responsible academic is thus *by definition* committed ... to the orthodoxies that define communities of competent inquirers and underwrite standards for inquiry carried out in those communities. [italics in the original]

But this accurate *sociological* observation elides the possible *epistemic* differences among disciplinary communities, as well as the crucial distinction between orthodoxies that are in principle revisable and axioms that by definition are not. For instance, Biology departments today are indeed committed to the “orthodoxy” that biological species have evolved and that Darwin’s theory of natural and sexual selection gives a broadly correct explanation of that evolution (though there is of course vigorous debate concerning the details of that explanation, such as the importance of group selection). Furthermore, this orthodoxy is indeed empirically controversial in the sense that, despite its almost unanimous acceptance among academics, in many countries of the world

Foundation president Dr. Scot] Glasberg or ASPS for caving to activist demands; clearly their culture is just as censorious as the other medical and psychological associations when it comes to Cass.”

Along similar lines, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry rejected two panels that included European experts in gender medicine who had expressed concern about unrestricted access to puberty blockers (as well as one specialist favoring unrestricted transition) – citing “space and time constraints” – even though its October 2023 conference accepted more than 10 other presentations on transgender issues (see [Sibarium, 2023](#) for details).

A similar censoriousness was evident in the UK Royal College of Psychiatrists ([Zenith, 2023a, 2023b](#)) and other UK medical bodies ([Singer et al., 2023](#); [Devlin & Sample, 2024](#)), and in the American Academy of Pediatrics ([Davis, 2024b](#)).

⁶⁸ Indeed, in many parts of the world today, the moral *impermissibility* of homosexuality is considered to be settled *axiomatically*. It goes without saying that I am harshly critical of this view, which not only (like its gender-studies counterpart) mischaracterizes the epistemic status of the proposition, but also (unlike its gender-studies counterpart) gets the final conclusion wrong in my opinion.

it is vigorously disputed by large segments of the public.⁶⁹ But this orthodoxy is not *axiomatic*; rather, it is the result of two centuries' accumulation of empirical evidence, together with free and open debate about its meaning. Indeed, the community of biologists today would in principle be open to convincing evidence that this orthodoxy is false (for instance, the discovery of dinosaur fossils in Precambrian geological strata), just as the physics community was when Albert Einstein (1905) cogently critiqued the "orthodoxy" of Newtonian mechanics.⁷⁰ (A similar distinction arises in the discussion of two contrasting senses of "settled science", at the end of Section 6 below.)⁷¹

It is, however, far from clear that a similar deep engagement with alternative views, or openness to refutation, underpins this avowedly axiomatic orthodoxy in Gender Studies. Indeed, Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 202) concede that

⁶⁹ Regarding the USA, see Pew Research Center (2019, 2025, pp. 203–204), Miller et al. (2021) and Brennan (2024). Regarding Muslim-majority nations, see Pew Research Center (2013). See also Miller et al. (2006) for data from a variety of countries, mostly in Europe.

⁷⁰ It should be stressed, however, that the falsification of a scientific theory is a much subtler issue than it might naively seem at first – a fact of which philosophers of science, and indeed scientists themselves in their daily practice, are well aware. The deduction of empirical predictions from a scientific theory necessarily relies on numerous auxiliary hypotheses (concerning the relevant and irrelevant aspects of the observational or experimental situation, the functioning of measurement instruments, etc.) – an important fact that was pointed out long ago by the physicist-philosopher Pierre Duhem (1914/1954). And when an empirical prediction is contradicted by an observation or an experiment, the culprit could be either the theory under test or one of the auxiliary hypotheses. It may not be obvious, at least at first, which is the case; many further experiments may be needed in order to decide between the various possible explanations. For instance, in the example at hand, paleontologists might worry that some unusual geological process has mixed Jurassic or Cretaceous rocks into Precambrian strata. Nevertheless, there may come a point, after extensive investigation, when all such alternative explanations have become implausible, and all reasonable scientists consider the theory to have been falsified. For further discussion of this important issue in the philosophy of science, see e.g., Ladyman (2002, pp. 77–81, 88–89, 169–171), Sokal (2008, pp. 185–189) and Chalmers (2013, chapter 7).

See also the end of Section 6 below for further discussion of the Newton–Einstein case.

⁷¹ It is also worth noting that Moody-Adams' (2015) article is in fact more nuanced than the brief quotation used by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) would suggest. She stresses, for instance, that

an appropriate defense [of academic freedom] must articulate the circumstances under which academics, in general, *rightfully* exercise control over the functions of the university. (108, emphasis in the original)

and that

any decision to exclude [certain ideas] must either have a clear relation to standards of argument and inquiry sanctioned by the discipline (or disciplines) ... or must embody standards that can be convincingly shown more reasonable than current disciplinary practices. (110)

Furthermore, she stresses that

public trust in the academy and its disciplines depends upon the public's confidence that accredited academics can be counted on to embody certain ... intellectual virtues: ... [notably, the] readiness to engage in careful inquiry and to translate the outcomes of that inquiry into responsible teaching, research, and (in some cases) extramural pronouncements. ... [S]erious inquiry is ideally disinterested inquiry that aims at truth ... (108)

Still, it seems to me that Moody-Adams overrates the sociological attributes of academic disciplines and gives insufficient attention to the necessary epistemic judgments; she thus accepts too uncritically, in my view, what she calls "the sincere and discerning judgment of competent academic inquirers" (119).

While the moral permissibility of homosexuality is a settled question in gender studies, it is regarded as an open question by a sizeable portion of those with recognized disciplinary competence and institutional credibility in disciplines like theology [*sic*] and philosophy.

This casts doubt on whether the members of the Gender Studies department have adequately reflected on – or even bothered to familiarize themselves with – the critiques put forth by some of their colleagues in Philosophy. And it furthermore suggests, as Peters and Nottelmann (2021, p. 7246) observe,

that the no-platforming of axiom skeptics wouldn't promote but [would in fact] *reduce* disciplinary knowledge and standards. For suppose that in the discipline of gender studies the moral permissibility of homosexuality is axiomatic and that, as recommended by Simpson and Srinivasan, axiom dissenters are excluded from giving academic talks in the discipline. At university, gender studies students and faculty will then not be able to confront authentic advocates of the view that homosexuality is morally impermissible. This ... reduces their chance of developing strong arguments against it. The no-platforming of axiom skeptics thus makes it less likely that students and experts within a given discipline acquire the skill to defend their most basic disciplinary assumptions convincingly. [*italics in the original*]⁷²

Of course, this analysis of Gender Studies' "axioms" applies even more strongly to some of its more recent orthodoxies, such as those concerning sex and gender identity, where the debates in Philosophy are even fiercer, and the critique from Biology is devastating (but ignored or misrepresented).

In an interesting article, Brian Leiter (2018) has addressed the question of which academic disciplines qualify as a *Wissenschaft* – that is, a disciplinary community of scholars meriting the special prerogatives of academic freedom as understood by Simpson–Srinivasan and myself⁷³

See also Post (2009, especially 756–766) for an insightful discussion of the role played by disciplinary norms in justifying claims to academic freedom, particularly in the humanities. – and he stressed (2018, pp. 38–39) that the criteria must be, at bottom, epistemic:

Universities will be in no position to defend academic freedom in capitalist societies – given the powerful interests aligned against such freedom for reasons unrelated to the value of truth – unless they are prepared to insure [*sic*] that the fields of inquiry they nurture and protect aim for truth, and do so utilizing methods of inquiry that have truth not simply as their aim, but as their reasonably frequent result.⁷⁴

⁷² This comment is, of course, a direct application of John Stuart Mill's third reason for free and open debate, discussed in Section 6 below, and explicitly cited by Peters and Nottelmann (2021, section 3.1).

⁷³ Leiter's (2018, p. 33) definition of *Wissenschaft* is "any systematic form of inquiry into nature, history, literature, or society marked by rigorous methods that secure the reliability or truth of its findings". This is essentially identical to the definition of a "*bona fide* [academic] discipline" given by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 202, footnote 30) and quoted at the beginning of this section.

⁷⁴ Leiter (2018, p. 38) also expressed his view that "Postmodern skeptics about truth probably have no claim to the protections of academic freedom, unless they wish to claim that their inquiries reveal the truth that there is no truth, which would thrust them back into the relativist paradoxes diagnosed by Plato in antiquity." For my own part, I would defend postmodernists' academic freedom on the grounds that they are raising important *questions*, even if their proposed answers are inadequate or self-contradictory. See Mill's second, third and fourth reasons in favor of the freedom of debate, discussed in Section 6 below. To this I would add a "slippery

Among other criteria, Leiter urged (2018, p. 39) that “Academic fields that want to insulate themselves from assessment by ‘outsiders’ should be treated as inherently suspect, though not necessarily pretenders to being a *Wissenschaft*.” Referring to “the potentially dangerous circularity of academic freedom based on disciplinary expertise”, he concluded that “I see no way around it, except to require that all university disciplines be open to critique from other university disciplines.” This criterion clearly forbids cross-disciplinary no-platforming, and it casts doubt on appeals to “disciplinary competence” (much less to “settled science”) emanating from academic fields that have disdained engagement with critique from other university disciplines.

Traditional academic disciplines are defined by their subject matter; and where there are significant controversies among experts in that subject matter concerning fundamental conceptual issues, a wide variety of defensible positions are (or ought to be) represented within the disciplinary community. There is no reason why the same approach could not be applied to the newer interdisciplinary “disciplines”. For instance, Gender Studies could be defined by its subject matter – the study of sex and gender in humans – and by its integration of methods and insights from anthropology, biology, primatology, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science, law, economics, archaeology, art history, literature and numerous other fields. But trouble arises when new “disciplines” are created, not simply by a delineation of the subject matter, but by the imposition of moral or political *axioms*. In these cases it is far from clear that such “disciplines” merit treatment as a *Wissenschaft* in the sense required for the no-platforming argumentation of Simpson and Srinivasan (2018).⁷⁵

Let me stress that my epistemic and methodological critique of Gender Studies – or rather, of certain aspects of that field as Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) have described it – does *not* entail that Gender Studies departments ought to be abolished – far from it. Much good and valuable work is undoubtedly being done in those departments, and it would be very sad – as well as a manifest violation of academic freedom – were it to be lost. On the other hand, much other work in Gender Studies – including that of some of its luminaries – is, in my humble opinion, deficient with respect to universal standards of scholarly behavior: for instance, avoiding vices such as *ad hominem* argument, misrepresentation of opponents’ views, unsupported generalizations, unjustified conflation of distinct concepts or views, and begging the question.⁷⁶ Moreover, this epistemic evaluation is not simply a substantive scholarly question, or my personal

slope” argument: even if one were to concede for the sake of argument that radical skepticism about truth undermines the claim to academic freedom, I would argue that it is still too dangerous to entrust governments or university administrations with the power to decide which philosophical views merit protection and which do not.

⁷⁵ Along similar lines, Leiter (2018, p. 38) observed that “serious worries arise about those academic subjects that are not organized around *wissenschaftlich* techniques, but around the moral and political concerns of (often justly) aggrieved social groups seeking ‘recognition’”. He adds (2018, p. 44, footnote 12) that “The tragedy here is that many disciplines ignored these groups for non-epistemic reasons, e.g., racism, sexism, and other parochial prejudices. Unfortunately, at many, but not all universities, programs devoted to neglected groups have evolved in ways that reflect non-epistemic normative agendas.”

⁷⁶ Compare, for instance, the recent blockbuster book of Judith Butler (2024) with the devastating reviews by A. Byrne (2024b), Pollitt (2024), Özkırımlı (2024), Favale (2024) and Kirchick (2024). To the best of my knowledge, neither Butler nor any of her supporters have yet responded to (or even acknowledged the existence of) these reviews, with one exception: a blog by philosopher Shelley Tremain (2024) that criticises *one word* (“lunatics”) in Byrne’s (2024b) long article (one of “the distinctly tendentious ways in

pet peeve; it is directly relevant to the issue of no-platforming. For if the consensus in one department were to be allowed to suppress debate in another department – a proposal that I oppose, but some people apparently support, at the very least in practice if not also in theory – then comparison of departments according to their scholarly and epistemic *bona fides* cannot be avoided. And were such a comparison to be undertaken, I do not think that Gender Studies would fare well in comparison with Philosophy or Biology.

Of course, it is far beyond the scope of the present article to substantiate this latter assertion. But neither is it necessary for my present purposes: my critique of Simpson and Srinivasan's (2018) arguments concerning cross-disciplinary no-platforming is founded (in part) on the claim that such a scholarly and epistemic comparison of disciplines is *necessary* (and is missing from Simpson–Srinivasan's discussion), not on any particular claim about the *result* of that comparison.

Please note also that this epistemic comparison is necessitated only by virtue of the stark asymmetry in the communicative pretensions of the various “sides”. No one in the Biology department, to the best of my knowledge, is attempting to censor gender-studies scholars (or for that matter, fellow biologists) who contend that sex is a social construction or a “spectrum”; their preferred method is rebuttal and refutation. By contrast, many academics in Gender Studies, in collaboration with like-minded colleagues in other disciplines, have been loudly attempting (and sometimes succeeding) to censor those scholars who dare to contend that sex is biological, binary, immutable and socially relevant in at least some contexts, or who disagree with other aspects of gender-identity theory⁷⁷ (as I believe I have amply demonstrated in Section 3).⁷⁸

which philosophers deploy ableist language to signify allegedly natural defect with respect to a purportedly universal intelligence”).

However, the feminist journal *Signs* did publish a symposium consisting of four laudatory commentaries on Butler's book followed by a “response” by Butler (Gago et al., 2024). Also, the journal *Contemporary Sociology* published a symposium in which four reviewers endorsed Butler's main theses while sometimes criticizing her for not going far enough or deeply enough, followed again by a reply by Butler (*Contemporary Sociology*, 2025).

⁷⁷ For instance, that subjective gender identity should take precedence over biological sex in all social and legal situations; that transwomen (that is to say, biological males who consider themselves to be women) and natal women should be treated in the same manner in all situations (including single-sex changing rooms and women's sports); and that teenagers questioning their gender identity or asserting a “trans” identity should routinely be “affirmed” and prescribed puberty blockers. Disagreement with these contested philosophical, social, political and medical propositions is summarily labeled by gender-identity activists as “transphobia” and “hate speech”, with a clear double aim: to discredit the gender-critical position as “prejudice” (e.g., *Parliamentary Assembly*, 2022) or as questioning “trans people's right to exist” (e.g., *Stonewall*, 2018; *Kennedy*, 2024) or even as “in effect or intent arguing for the elimination of others” (Ahmed, 2015, 2016, p. 31), and thereby to avoid confronting the actual substance of the debate; and, if possible, to block its expression entirely (e.g., *Rosario Sánchez*, 2020; *BBC*, 2021; *Law Commission*, 2021, 10.508; *LSE*, 2021; *Biggs*, 2021; *UCU*, 2022; *Grove*, 2023; *Muñía García*, 2024; *Phoenix v Open University*, 2024; *Phoenix*, 2024; see also the references cited above in footnote 35).

In reality – and this should go without saying – gender-critical feminists (many of whom are lesbians or in other ways gender-norm-nonconforming) frequently take pains to stress that transgender people (and gender-norm-nonconforming people more generally) should be free to live their lives as they wish and should be fully protected from violence, discrimination and harassment. See, for instance, *Jones* (2015), *Stock* (2021, chapter 8), *Lawford-Smith* (2022, chapters 5 and 6), *Benjamin* (2023), *Sullivan and Todd* (2024, pp. 8–9) among many others. Their disagreement with gender-identity theory lies elsewhere.

⁷⁸ I leave it as an open question for future research to attempt to determine *why* there is this asymmetry in communicative pretensions. It may arise in part from the different philosophical attitudes towards

Last but definitely not least, it is revealing that Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) define no-platforming as “blocking, or attempting to block, an individual from speaking at a university because of her expressed *moral or political* views” [emphasis mine].⁷⁹ What do a scholar’s “moral or political views” have to do with competence in an academic discipline? The (negative) evaluation of a person’s disciplinary competence in a truth-seeking field of inquiry is, let it not be forgotten, the alleged ground justifying no-platforming. If holding particular moral or political views is indeed considered to be a crucial element of disciplinary competence in Department X, then it is legitimate to wonder, on epistemic grounds, whether Department X really merits the status of an “academic discipline properly construed”. After all, in empirical fields of inquiry (including the empirical social sciences), moral or political commitments are manifestly *irrelevant* to disciplinary competence. Indeed, strong moral or political commitments could potentially (though not inevitably) compromise the objective analysis of empirical data whenever those commitments are relevant to the subject at hand.⁸⁰ And even in fields of inquiry that are directly concerned with moral and political values – such as philosophy – why should a *prior* commitment to *particular* values be seen as a requisite aspect of, or even an indirect indicator of, disciplinary competence? If anything, one could argue that an immovable (“axiomatic”) commitment to particular moral and political values – a commitment strong

evidence, language and power that are implicitly or explicitly held by the various parties. Or it may arise simply from the differential quality of the substantive arguments, combined with the natural human tendency to resort to censorship as a fallback strategy to protect one’s position when other approaches appear insufficient.

⁷⁹ I stress that, although Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) *define* no-platforming via the moral or political motivations of the (would-be) no-platformers, their *defense* of no-platforming (in those cases where they do defend it) is based entirely on judgments of disciplinary competence. But two cases need here to be disambiguated:

- (a) Grounds of disciplinary competence that are independent of moral and political considerations.
- (b) Grounds of (alleged) disciplinary competence that are *based on* moral or political considerations.

Regarding type (a) – to take an example suggested to me by Simpson in private conversation – an Armenian nationalist group may seek to de-platform a revisionist historian for manifestly political reasons, but it may nevertheless turn out that the “historian” is professionally incompetent and that his argumentation is bogus; in this case, no-platforming would be justified. (And post-invitation de-platforming would be justified, though it might or might not be the best choice for pragmatic reasons.) I have no objection of principle to no-platforming of type (a); I would only warn that allegations of disciplinary incompetence must be carefully scrutinized, to guard against the cases in which those allegations are trumped-up or even entirely spurious, and are a mere pretext for no-platforming on moral or political grounds (see the further discussion in Section 7 below). That being said, my discussion in this paragraph and the next is concerned solely with no-platforming of type (b). I thank Rob Simpson for discussions that have led to this clarificatory footnote.

⁸⁰ I stress that there is no *necessary* incompatibility between scientific objectivity and the holding of strong political or moral views. To take one example, the distinguished economist Roland Fryer has an obvious personal stake in preventing police violence against Black people (he is a Black man), as well as a strong moral commitment; but this did not stop him from publishing an article of careful empirical research (Fryer, 2019) that found, contrary to his initial conjectures, that police in the United States are *not* more likely to use lethal violence against Black than white civilians (though they *are* more likely to use non-lethal violence). See also Durlauf and Heckman (2020) for a critique, and Fryer (2020) for a response.

Or to give another example, the renowned New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman recounts (2005, pp. 1–15) how he began adulthood as a passionate fundamentalist Christian, anxious to read the infallible word of God in its original Greek – and only when he did, and started studying its internal contradictions and the history of its composition, he realized that fundamentalist Christianity is untenable.

enough to motivate no-platforming – should be seen as *antithetical* to the openness to reason and argument that is, or at least ought to be, central to scholarship in all fields. Finally, as Leiter (2018, p. 38) observed, “when methods of inquiry are *explicitly* subsumed to moral or political ends, rather than epistemic ones, the defense of academic freedom [for the practitioners of those fields] will be in trouble” [italics in the original].

Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 203) do sketch, very briefly, a line of reasoning in favor of the view (which they explicitly state that “our argument presupposes”) that “normative moral and political claims – e.g., about the permissibility of homosexuality, or slavery, or the rights of trans people – can be the proper objects of disciplinary expertise.” Their argument is based on the tacit (unstated) assumption that (a) normative moral and political claims can have an objective truth value, together with the observation that (b) “disciplines worth the name either explicitly or tacitly treat certain normative *epistemic* commitments to be axiomatic and constitutive of disciplinary competence.” [italics in the original] Clearly (a) is defensible but is also vigorously debated among moral philosophers; it is implausible that even a commitment to the abstract proposition (a), or for that matter to its negation – much less to specific instances of it – could be a legitimate mark of disciplinary competence in any academic field.⁸¹ As for (b), it is certainly true, but it is unclear why the fact of a discipline’s commitment to certain *epistemic* values should have any relevance for the very different question of the disciplinary status of substantive *moral and political* values.

6. Why Does It Matter?

I contend that the dangers posed by no-platforming along the lines endorsed by Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) are not minor, but in fact go to the heart of the scholarly enterprise, at least if that enterprise is understood as genuinely truth-seeking⁸²; and my reasons for

⁸¹ Consider a concrete example that is currently hotly debated around the world: the moral permissibility or impermissibility of abortion. (Or if one wishes to put the issue in a more nuanced manner: the situations in which abortion has a greater or lesser degree of moral justification.) This issue is relevant, at least indirectly, to many disciplines: philosophy first and foremost, but also sociology, psychology, criminology, anthropology, history, biology, economics ... and of course women’s studies. Disciplinary competence on this issue should, it seems to me, consist of a deep knowledge of the manifold arguments *on both sides*, of their strengths and weaknesses, and of the counterarguments; that knowledge is not only what identifies a person as an expert on the subject – rather than a mere barroom disputant – but above all what enables her or him to be an illuminating *teacher*. It is hard to see why having a particular substantive view on this question should be a mark for or against an individual’s disciplinary competence.

A similar conclusion applies, albeit for different reasons, to issues on which there is by now a near-unanimous consensus: for instance, the moral impermissibility of slavery. If anything distinguishes an expert on this question, it would be a knowledge of the *long-forgotten* arguments *on both sides* of the question – an expertise that is particularly relevant in fields such as history and anthropology, in view of the ubiquity of slavery in human history and culture. See Mill’s third argument, discussed in Section 6 below.

Finally, considerations of both types apply to intermediate cases such as the moral permissibility of homosexuality: an issue on which there is today a wide consensus among liberal Westerners, but that is far from universal (to say the least) either historically or cross-culturally.

⁸² In empirical fields of inquiry (including the natural sciences as well as factual aspects of history and the social sciences), I understand “truth” to mean simply “correspondence with reality” – a position that I have defended elsewhere (Sokal, 2008, chapter 7). In non-empirical fields of inquiry (including interpretive aspects of history and the social sciences, and argumentation concerning moral and political values),

contending this go back to John Stuart Mill. In Chapter II of his classic essay, *On Liberty* (Mill, 1859/2003), Mill gives four reasons why suppressing dissident ideas is harmful, not just to the people whose ideas are being suppressed, but even – and perhaps above all – to the people doing the suppression. The first two reasons are obvious, but perhaps underappreciated these days; the third and fourth reasons are more subtle and very often forgotten.

Mill's first reason is the most obvious: it is possible that the dominant idea is wrong, and the idea marked for suppression is right. Of course, we all naturally think that our current opinions are correct (otherwise they wouldn't be our opinions); but we still ought to be willing to admit that we are not *infallible*.⁸³ And that means, if we really care about truth, that we ought to be open to hearing arguments against our current opinions, and open to changing those opinions whenever the counterarguments turn out to be cogent. Suppressing contrary opinions short-circuits that process.⁸⁴ And as Mill points out, even if a person is subjectively certain that her own view is correct, she still has no right to decide that issue for everyone else, and to prevent them for using their own brains to judge; her subjective certainty does not entail her actual infallibility. Mill also observes that while most people are willing to acknowledge, in the abstract, that they are not infallible, they are much less willing to admit that they might possibly be wrong on this or that particular issue, especially if it is an issue about which they feel strongly.⁸⁵

Mill's first reason in favor of robust debate takes on further importance in view of the general human tendency towards confirmation bias: see Stanovich (2021) for a detailed review and analysis of the empirical and theoretical literature. There is strong empirical evidence that cognitive sophistication does *not* reduce confirmation bias; indeed, it may

I am willing to circumvent difficult philosophical issues concerning the ontological and epistemic status of the underlying propositions by forgoing any reference to "truth" and substituting instead something like "cogent and illuminating reasoning".

⁸³ Excepting those of us who are popes of the Roman Catholic Church (Pius IX, 1870, Chapter IV).

⁸⁴ Half a century before Mill, Thomas Paine eloquently made the same observation in the introductory note to his book *The Age of Reason* (1794/1995):

I have always strenuously supported the Right of every Man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it.

Ironically, the publishers and sellers of Paine's book were repeatedly prosecuted in Britain for blasphemous libel and seditious libel, for three decades after its publication (Claeys, 1989, pp. 188, 212; Wiener, 1988; Doub, 2017). When Paine's publisher, Richard Carlile, was indicted in 1819 for blasphemy, he responded to the Society for the Suppression of Vice, which had characterised him as "an evil disposed and wicked person", in true Millian fashion:

Have you no priests in your Society? Why do you not set them to write a volume of the same size to refute the arguments and assertions of Paine? I will pledge myself to sell it with the other. (quoted in Wiener, 1988, 125n18)

⁸⁵ (Mill, 1859/2003, pp. 88–92). Of course, people are *correct* to assign a smaller subjective probability to "I am wrong on this particular issue" than to "I am wrong on at least one issue"; indeed, they are normatively *obliged* to assign a smaller or equal probability to the former proposition than to the latter, because the former implies the latter. The trouble is that people habitually *overestimate* the reliability of their cognitive judgments on particular issues, compared to what is normatively justified: see e.g., Harvey (1997), Hoffrage (2022) and Porter et al. (2022) for reviews of the empirical literature.

even be the case that cognitively sophisticated people (such as are typically found in universities) are *more* prone to confirmation bias than other people, because of their greater ability to construct rationalizations for their current views and to explain away contrary evidence.⁸⁶

Mill's second reason is that, even if the dominant idea is largely right, it is rarely 100% right: "the nonconforming opinion is needed to supply the remainder of the truth, of which the received doctrine embodies only a part." (Mill, 1859/2003, p. 112) So even if your ideas are 90% or 99% right, you can still improve them by taking account of thoughtful critiques; and that is the case even if those critiques are 90% or 99% wrong. But you can't do that if the critiques are suppressed.

Mill's third reason concerns the light thrown on true ideas by their confrontation with error; and since it is more subtle, it is perhaps useful to quote him at length. Even if a person's ideas are 100% correct,

He [*sic*] who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion.

Nor is it enough that he should hear the arguments of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. That is not the way to do justice to the arguments, or bring them into real contact with his own mind. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form ...

Ninety-nine in a hundred of what are called educated men are in this condition; even of those who can argue fluently for their opinions. Their conclusion may be true, but it might be false for anything they know: they have never thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently from them, and considered what such persons may have to say; and consequently they do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess.⁸⁷

In short,

even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. ... [If a true idea] is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not a living truth.⁸⁸

Mill's second and third reasons apply, in my view, to Gilley's (2017) article "The case for colonialism", which was mentioned in Section 3 (see footnote 43). Mill's second and

⁸⁶ See Stanovich (2021, pp. 56–61) and al-Gharbi (2024, p. 200, 346n106–8) for references to the original research.

⁸⁷ Mill (1859/2003, pp. 104–105). See also Peters and Nottelmann (2021, sections 3.1, 3.2 and 4.2) for further discussion, including psychological data supporting Mill's view. And compare footnote 81 above, concerning the knowledge enabling a person to be an illuminating teacher.

⁸⁸ Mill (1859/2003, pp. 118, 103; see also 106–107 for further explanation).

third reasons also illustrate, I would argue, how the suppression even of an extreme doctrine such as Holocaust denial – what [Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018, p. 199\)](#) consider to be an “easier” case – raises more subtle issues than it may appear at first. For starters, some of the people commonly labeled “Holocaust deniers” may not in fact deny the Nazi murder of millions of Jews and others, but simply question some aspects of the generally accepted historical account (for instance, the numbers of dead in the concentration camps, or the numbers that died from extermination versus starvation and other “natural” causes). Moreover, even those who make claims that are radically false – such as Robert Faurisson’s denial of the existence of gas chambers – can play a useful role by prodding historians to uncover better evidence. For instance, the eminent Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, author of the acclaimed work, *The Destruction of the European Jews* ([Hilberg, 2003](#)), was of the opinion that

in a certain way, Faurisson and others, without intending to, have done us a service. They raised questions that had the effect of spurring historians to engage in new research. They forced us to gather more information, to re-examine documents, and to dig deeper into understanding what happened. ([Nouvel Observateur, 1982](#), translation mine)

This does not imply, of course, that Holocaust deniers should be invited to speak at History seminars, but it does at least suggest that laws prohibiting the expression of such views are counterproductive to scholarship ([Bricmont, 2014](#)). Indeed, [Veber \(2021\)](#) illuminatingly shows how Mill’s third reason applies even to manifestly false theories such as flat-earthism.

Implicitly drawing on all three of the foregoing arguments, the social psychologist Jonathan [Haidt \(2022\)](#) has observed that “the most pervasive obstacle to good thinking is confirmation bias” and added memorably, citing Mill, that

The most reliable cure for confirmation bias is interaction with people who don’t share your beliefs. They confront you with counterevidence and counterargument. ... People who think differently and are willing to speak up if they disagree with you make you smarter, almost as if they are extensions of your own brain. People who try to silence or intimidate their critics make themselves stupider ...

And to the extent that they are successful in silencing or intimidating their critics, they make the rest of us stupider as well.

Mill’s fourth argument is that the freedom of debate is a crucial ingredient in legitimising knowledge in all fields. And it is striking that, to illustrate this, Mill used an example from a subject not usually thought of as controversial: namely, physics (or as it was called in those days, natural philosophy). Isaac Newton published his celebrated laws of motion in 1687; and by the time Mill was writing in 1859, scientists had accumulated overwhelming evidence, from both terrestrial and astronomical observations, that Newtonian physics is correct (even to the point of predicting accurately, in 1846, the existence and precise location of the hitherto-unknown planet Neptune). But, Mill points out, if at some point the government (or even just the scientific societies) had decided that, in view of the overwhelming evidence of the correctness of Newtonian mechanics, it would henceforth be forbidden to dispute it, then we would now have *much less reason* to believe in the correctness of Newtonian mechanics! It is precisely the fact that Newtonian mechanics has held up in the face of free and open debate that gives us such justified confidence in its correctness. In Mill’s words,

The beliefs which we have most warrant for have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded. If the challenge is not accepted, or is accepted and the attempt fails, we are far enough from certainty still; but we have done the best that the existing state of human reason admits of ... This is the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being, and this the sole way of attaining it. (Mill, 1859/2003, p. 91)

When that freedom of debate is curtailed, even true ideas stop being rationally justified.

There is also an added twist to this story, which illustrates the *first* side of Mill's argument, though Mill unfortunately didn't live to see it: it turns out that Newtonian mechanics is *not* correct (though it is an extremely accurate approximation in many circumstances); this was discovered in 1905, by Albert Einstein, more than 30 years after Mill's death. But this important fact might never have been discovered – or at the very least, its discovery would have been delayed – if criticism of Newton's theory had been forbidden.

This case also exemplifies the distinction between two radically different notions of “settled science”: disciplinary orthodoxies that serve as the foundation for what Kuhn (1970) would call “normal science”; and disciplinary orthodoxies erected as unquestionable truths, to which all dissent is forbidden. Two hundred years after the publication of the *Principia*, Newtonian mechanics was certainly a “settled science” (in the first sense) if ever there was one; and yet, Einstein – an unknown 26-year-old patent clerk – was able to publish his radical revision (Einstein, 1905) in the most prestigious physics journal of the time, *Annalen der Physik*. By comparison with Newtonian mechanics, the American Anthropological Association's (2023) claim to enunciate “settled science” (in the second sense) is – not to put too fine a point on it – risible.

7. Conclusion: The Blind Spots of Simpson and Srinivasan

As Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) themselves explicitly recognise, at least when the issue is posed in abstract terms⁸⁹, their argument defending the legitimacy of no-platforming ultimately and inescapably relies not only on the *existence* of accepted disciplinary methodologies and standards of disciplinary competence – a sociological criterion – but also on their *soundness* as truth-conducive methods of investigation – an epistemic criterion. And yet, in their concrete discussion of the so-called “hard cases”, such as the no-platforming of gender-critical feminists, the epistemic criterion is nowhere to be found. Simpson and Srinivasan simply take for granted that if “Greer's trans-exclusionary [*sic*] views [*were*] one day rejected by all credentialed experts in the relevant humanities or social science disciplines”⁹⁰ – a purely sociological criterion – then the no-platforming could potentially be justified.

But the key question in the “hard cases”, as I have explained in Sections 3–5, is precisely the epistemic one: *Which* methods of investigation are truth-conducive, and

⁸⁹ See the passage from Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 202, footnote 30) quoted at the beginning of Section 5.

⁹⁰ Simpson and Srinivasan (2018, p. 201). It is worth noting once again the criticisms of Suissa and Sullivan (2021, p. 72) and Kramer (private communication) concerning the glaring omissions of biology, psychology, history and economics from Simpson and Srinivasan's list of “the relevant disciplines”: see footnote 29 above.

which academic disciplines are founded on truth-conducive methods of investigation? These questions cannot be evaded; they require concrete epistemic analysis of the “distinct disciplinary methods” employed within each academic community.^{91,92} Furthermore, as [Suissa and Sullivan \(2021, p. 73\)](#) point out,

the very existence of sound, content-based norms by which positions can be explored and argued with, depends on academics being able to function within a climate where they can talk and express ideas freely with their colleagues and students. If a range of prima facie unproblematic content is proscribed or self-censored, the result is that the scope of the academic discussions within which content-based judgement and distinctions are made in the first place becomes thin.

This suggests that academic disciplines in which particular methods or substantive conclusions have become *prematurely* consecrated as orthodoxies – or worse yet, as “axioms” not open to refutation – are less likely to be in possession of truth-conducive methods of investigation than disciplines in which the disciplinary consensus was formed after a long period of free and open debate. (But this latter observation is merely suggestive; it is not intended to substitute for concrete epistemic analysis.) Moreover, the need for epistemic comparison between disciplines becomes particularly acute if cross-disciplinary no-platforming is to be permitted – an issue on which [Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018, p. 203\)](#) are equivocal, but which is in any case highly prevalent in practice.

Furthermore, allegations of disciplinary incompetence must be carefully scrutinized and epistemically evaluated, to guard against the cases – of which I have given several examples in Section 3 – in which those allegations are trumped-up or even entirely spurious, and are a mere pretext for no-platforming on moral or political grounds. Indeed, as [Lang \(2023\)](#) has perceptively observed, the Simpson–Srinivasan rationale for no-platforming “may generate perverse incentives to label morally and politically contentious views as incompetent in order to justify their exclusion from debate”:

Think of all those instances in which the recalcitrant or questioning are fobbed off with the stern instruction to READ THE LITERATURE. We probably wouldn't encounter that timbre of response when half-baked contributions were made to exchanges about epistemicism or the normativity of logic. If I asked experts in these areas a naïve question, I might expect them, sooner rather than later, to bring to light my ignorance about those issues. But I wouldn't expect the drawbridge to close

⁹¹ It is, of course, far beyond the scope of this article to specify the precise nature of that epistemic analysis: that is, after all, what the philosophy of science, the philosophy of the social sciences, and the philosophy of the humanities are all about! Suffice it to say that *these* are the conversations we need to be having: first of all, on what those epistemic criteria should be; and secondly, using them to evaluate the epistemic status of the “distinct disciplinary methods” employed within each scholarly community. I thank Edward Skidelsky for raising this issue.

⁹² [Levy's \(2019\)](#) defense of some cases of no-platforming on the grounds that “provision of a platform confers credibility [and thus] ... generates higher-order evidence in favor of the speaker's claims ... by certifying expertise and representativeness” (500) is likewise founded on epistemic criteria, as Levy himself explicitly recognizes (500). However, Levy's article, unlike that of Simpson and Srinivasan, contains little discussion of academic disciplines or disciplinary standards; he does not address the issue of *who* is to make no-platforming decisions, or *whose* scholarly criteria they are to use. My arguments concerning Simpson and Srinivasan's blind spots therefore apply at least as strongly to [Levy \(2019\)](#).

immediately. I wouldn't expect my interlocutors to instruct me in solemn terms to remain silent until I was up to speed on the literature. [capitals in the original]

Lang concludes, astutely, that

Everyday gatekeeping can be at its most strident in debates where the intellectual price of entry is actually more modest, and that should make us suspicious of the function it is meant to serve.⁹³

Indeed, in some cases the pretext is self-evidently thin, or is forgone entirely. For instance, in another article [Suissa and Sullivan \(2022\)](#) recount in detail how a group of University College London (UCL) academics from a variety of fields, including six Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) leads for their faculties, attempted (in the end unsuccessfully) to get UCL management to cancel the scheduled Women's Liberation 2020 conference on the alleged grounds that the main organising group was "transphobic".⁹⁴ Suissa and Sullivan observe that

While academics expect their work to be subject to criticism and peer review, there is a vast difference between rejecting a conference paper or a journal article following a review of its contents by academics within the relevant field, and rejecting an entire conference program, speaker or event purely on the basis of the topic or the identity

⁹³ These considerations are also relevant to the distinction between no-platforming (failure to invite a speaker) and de-platforming (revocation of an existing invitation). There is no principled *logical* difference between the two: the key issue is *whether* the speaker possesses the required disciplinary competence, not *when* that judgment was made or revised. Nevertheless, when a speaker is invited by a university department – presumably indicating a positive evaluation of that person's disciplinary competence – and that invitation is subsequently revoked in the face of protests, it is a plausible (albeit rebuttable) presumption that the revocation was based on political or public-relations considerations rather than on a justified re-evaluation of the individual's disciplinary competence. But see footnote 79 above for a possible counterexample.

⁹⁴ The open letter demanding the cancellation, together with the list of signatures, can be found at [Mackay et al. \(2020\)](#). The letter's principal complaint concerns the views of Women's Place UK (WPUK), which co-organised the conference together with a group of UCL academics including Suissa and Sullivan:

WPUK's views on gender identity are transphobic and discriminatory. They go against everything that UCL has been trying to do in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion, and are in direct contradiction to Stonewall's UK Workplace Equality Index.

As [Suissa and Sullivan \(2022\)](#) point out,

It goes without saying that the accusation of "transphobia" is a complete distortion, at least in the ordinary sense of that word ([Sokal, 2022](#)). WPUK fully supports the right of transgender people to live their lives free from harassment, discrimination, and violence – a right enshrined in the 2010 Equality Act, where "gender reassignment" is one of nine protected characteristics. However, WPUK does disagree with what the letter-writers rather tendentiously called "proposed improvements [sic] to the Gender Recognition Act."

They add that

None of the letter-writers contacted us to ask for more information about the conference, which they would of course have been welcome to attend and during which they would have been free to express their views. In fact, they rebuffed our attempts to arrange a meeting to discuss the matter with them and address any concerns they may have had about the proposed conference program.

of the speaker, based on political rather than scholarly objections. Those who defend no-platforming sometimes appear willfully blind to the difference between scholarly judgment and attempts to silence experts by activists who have prejudged a case on the basis of their ideological position.

That difference – between justified scholarly judgment and ideological dogmatism – is indeed the heart of the matter, and the distinction is ultimately epistemic. Furthermore, its application to specific cases requires not just epistemological reasoning but also the meticulous analysis of evidence concerning the arguments and probable motivations of the no-platformers.⁹⁵ Those two crucial elements – which I have tried to provide here in some detail – are, unfortunately, completely absent in the article of [Simpson and Srinivasan \(2018\)](#).

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⁹⁵ Here the arguments are those publicly expressed, but the probable motivations must be *inferred* from the publicly available evidence, since we have no direct access to other people's mental states. And although inference about other people's mental states is both routine and unavoidable in many areas of life – for instance, in civil and criminal legal proceedings, where the “knowledge” and “intent” of actors in the case are often key elements – it is nevertheless salutary always to remind ourselves that our conjectures about other people's mental states are only (more or less plausible) *conjectures*, and that they are frequently erroneous or at least incomplete.

Concerning criteria for the analysis of the no-platformers' motivations – and in particular for distinguishing between legitimate criticism (not aiming at suppression) and intolerant denunciation (aimed at provoking a climate of censorship and/or self-censorship) – a full discussion is beyond the scope of this article, but some useful touchstones were suggested by [Rauch \(2021, p. 218\)](#):

Criticism seeks to engage in conversations and identify error; canceling seeks to stigmatize conversations and punish the errant. Criticism cares whether statements are true; canceling cares about their social effects. Criticism exploits viewpoint diversity; canceling imposes viewpoint conformity. Criticism is a substitute for social punishment (we kill our hypotheses rather than each other); canceling is a form of social punishment (we kill your hypothesis by killing you socially).

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