

*Editorial*

## Editorial

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The first issue of this journal appeared in April 2021. Most editors of new academic journals hope that their venture will be long-lived venture, but our aim was to provide an interim solution for a temporary problem.

We therefore have mixed feelings about reaching the fifth anniversary of the launch of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*. On the one hand, we are pleased to continue to give the authors of the twelve papers published in this issue an opportunity to share arguments and ideas that would have been difficult, and in some cases impossible, to publish elsewhere. On the other hand, we were hoping that five years would be enough for academic freedom to return to its central role in academia, or, even better, to become its guiding principle.

We are not there yet. That is clear from several events, but here we will discuss just one. In March 2026, over 2000 people, including students and academics, signed a petition to the University of Ghent urging it not to hire Nathan Cofnas. And at least 45 philosophers from the philosophy department at the same university signed a similar petition. (The petitions were unsuccessful: Cofnas has been hired.) Cofnas had previously been the target of an attempt to have him dismissed from his position at the University of Cambridge, and had endured the withdrawal of his fellowship at Emmanuel College. Now he found himself in a very similar situation in Belgium.

Why does Cofnas elicit such unwelcoming reactions whenever he moves to a new university? His new colleagues at Ghent argued in their letter that Cofnas's beliefs about demographic differences in average IQ levels are a form of racism, that research on IQ differences is "pseudoscience" and that the scientific community agrees that this whole area of research is "rubbish".

There is no doubt that differences in average IQ among different demographic groups is today a highly controversial topic. And, indeed, Cofnas is not the first academic to experience strong opposition to his research in this area. Other academics have been fired for defending the legitimacy of this area of investigation.

This topic is considered taboo, we believe, for the pernicious effects it could have. For example, if some groups have, on average, higher IQ than others, then individual members of groups that have a lower average IQ could be discriminated against. This is a genuine concern, and we do not underestimate its importance; but we need to ask ourselves whether, if we are concerned about potential discrimination, trying to prevent research on this topic is the best course of action. This is the core question of “The Equality Paradox,” the lead paper in this issue. It is a regrettable sign of the times that the author of this paper has used the pseudonym Shuichi Tezuka, but given the problems that Cofnas has had to face, that is an understandable choice.

In this paper, Tezuka argues that banning research on group differences can be harmful to some minorities. The “equality paradox” referred to in the title is that once one assumes that all groups have equal average cognitive abilities, every persistent disparity in test scores among demographic groups will be explained as the result of racism. At that point, the only way to rebalance the situation is to discriminate against some groups in favour of others, often to the considerable disadvantage of members of groups with lower average scores. We find it a challenging argument and hope that it will lead to further discussion of the legitimacy of research in this area.

The second paper in this issue, by Alan Sokal, engages with the wider, but closely related, question about when we have epistemic and methodological reasons to deny someone an academic platform. Sokal discusses when, for instance, an area of research can be dismissed as “pseudoscience” or “rubbish”, to use the terms of the 45 philosophers who signed the letter opposing the hiring of Cofnas. According to Sokal, when we use a sociological, rather than an epistemic, criterion to address the legitimacy of a researcher, or of their whole area of research, we lack a solid basis for dismissing it. Sokal builds his argument in response to a paper on no-platforming by Simpson and Srinivasan, though it also works well as a stand-alone work, offering a framework for understanding academic freedom and its limits

As Sokal argues, it is important to understand whether the dismissal of research on group differences in IQ as pseudoscience and rubbish is based on epistemic reasons or merely on sociological ones. Both Tezuka and Sokal discuss a survey carried out by Clark et al. on 470 American psychology professors. They were asked about ten taboo ideas, including those at the centre of the controversy over Cofnas’s work. The study shows that there is considerable variation in experts’ beliefs. Moreover, these results suggest that scholars might not disclose publicly how acceptable they consider some hypotheses, which makes it harder to understand whether what is perceived as a scientific consensus on a certain topic actually is so. This is the empirical question that underpins the conceptual one discussed by Sokal: whether the “consensus” being invoked against this area of research actually exists, and whether it is as solid as some academics claim it to be. The first two papers in this issue are useful resources to start to think about these questions with the rigour and seriousness they deserve.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interests.