

No Platforming: Academic or Moralistic?

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Pea Soup, 29th November 2023

Abstract. This piece is part of a philosophical discussion with Gerald Lang on the topic of free speech and no platforming at universities. Lang criticises academic justifications for no platforming, i.e. arguments that cite the university's overarching epistemic aims to try to justify the no platforming of talks and speakers that are liable to subvert those aims. In essence, Lang is worried that such arguments can be used speciously, to try to justify the ideologically-motivated suppression of speech at universities. I argue that academic justifications for no platforming can legitimately inform speech policies and practices at universities, despite their potential for misuse in this way.

Although Gerald Lang is critical of mine and Amia Srinivasan's defence of no platforming,¹ I agree with a fair bit of what he says. So I'll begin with some stage-setting to bring our disagreements into focus. Lang is dissatisfied by the mismatch between

- (1) The in-principle justification for no platforming that Srinivasan and I offer, and
- (2) The actual motives that inspire real-life instances of no platforming.

What is our justification for no platforming? Building on work by Robert Post and Michele Moody-Adams,² Srinivasan and I defend no platforming by likening it to the ordinary processes of academic gatekeeping that surround discipline-based teaching and research. Gatekeeping sounds iffy, but it's really just another way of saying that academic work is built on intellectual standards. We don't rule out any view pre-emptively, on purely ideological grounds, but we do – in basically all of our teaching and research work – decide which views get a full hearing by judging how intellectually credible they are. Roughly, Srinivasan and I say that

no platforming is justifiable when it's an implementation or reasonable extrapolation of those ordinary processes.

What about (2)? What are the motives that inspire real-life instances of no platforming? Obviously different no platformers are driven by different things, but still, as Lang rightly observes, quite a lot of real-life no platforming (maybe most of it) isn't aimed at academic gatekeeping. Often, instead, real-life no platforming is inspired by the no platformer's desire to suppress views that are, by her lights, immoral or harmful.

So, Srinivasan and I are discussing and defending an atypical species of no platforming. We're making the case for *Academic* no platforming. But despite various superficial resemblances, this species is distinct from – and crucially, it's more easily defended than – the *Moralistic* variety of no platforming that dominates in the wild.

Beyond the initial observation that there is a mismatch between (1) and (2), Lang is worried that our defense of Academic no platforming might support groupthink in the academy. University departments and scholarly disciplines shouldn't be run as intellectual fiefdoms. We can't let scholarly cartels exploit their disciplinary authority to suppress heterodox views. And no platforming can be used like this. Opposing it can therefore be a way of protecting heterodox ideas and resisting groupthink.

Srinivasan and I basically agree with Lang about the badness of groupthink. But we have a less pessimistic view about how gatekeeping is related to it. Where Lang thinks that gatekeeping supports groupthink, we think it can also potentially disrupt it. It depends on how the power to gatekeep is distributed. (Consider what happens when a journal appoints a new, young, hip editorial team, who then launch a plan to broaden the journal's scope and stylistic norms.) In any case, we agree that the experts in any academic discipline are fallible – that they are affected by biases, in-group pressures, disciplinary inertia and methodological conservatism – and that heterodox views sometimes need to be protected. *Chauvinistic* gatekeeping, via no platforming or any other means, clearly undermines the epistemic success of academic communities.

The real crux of Lang's worry, though, with mine and Srinivasan's focus on Academic no platforming, is that it invites Moralistic no platformers to *speciously* denounce the academic competence of views that they oppose, in order to rationalise the suppression of those views. We're saying people can be properly denied an academic platform if their work is intellectually sub-par. Of course there are caveats. There are good reasons to avoid rescinding invitations, and very good (academic-freedom-based) reasons not to rescind invitations issued by academic staff under the auspices of their teaching or research. But regardless of such caveats, Lang thinks our approach “may generate perverse incentives to label... contentious views as incompetent in order to justify their exclusion from debate.” In

short, folks who want to Moralistically no platform others will pretend they're engaged in a legitimate form of Academic no platforming.

I don't want to brush this aside. These pretences are real and worth worrying about. We've all seen cases of people being disingenuous or self-deceived about why they dislike the views they dislike. We've seen people pretend that they find some view to be intellectually sub-par, when what's really going on is that they're outraged and they want to see it quashed. Probably lots of us do this, and it's a cheap move at best.

So, point taken. But I still want to push back on two fronts.

First, at the risk of being a bit cute, I don't think these incentives are *generated* by mine and Srinivasan's argument. They're just *there*, in lots of debates, including over which views get platformed at universities. In the midst of a hard-nosed debate there is always a temptation to undercut opposing views by saying that they're too stupid or ill-informed to deserve a hearing. People seeking to justify the no platforming of views they oppose don't need a philosophy paper to entice them into this style of critique.

Second, regardless of how these incentives arise, isn't this – that is: the question of academic competence – still *an appropriate place* to focus our attention, when we're judging calls for no platforming? The reason Holocaust denialism doesn't get platformed at universities isn't only that it's Antisemitic. So is a fair bit of 19th and 20th century German philosophy, after all. Holocaust denialism is out of bounds in part because it so shamelessly and moronically flouts the canons of serious inquiry. It ignores facts, brazenly reasons in circles, and conspiratorially dismisses counterevidence.

If you want to claim that other controversial views – ones that haven't been conclusively discredited – nevertheless should be placed outside of the university's sphere of serious inquiry, alongside Holocaust denialism and other quackery, then you have to make your case. And if your case holds up – if the views in question can be shown to be anti-intellectual rubbish; if the only way to buy into them is by echo chambering yourself – then that suggests those views really *aren't* owed a platform at universities.

The evaluation of such charges can go awry, and that's obviously a bad thing. But I don't believe that a defence of Academic no platforming is responsible for either (a) attempts to disguise Moralistic no platforming, or (b) others being taken in by those attempts. Disciplines and departments (and individual academics) need to be able to make credible judgements about which views satisfy the standards of disciplinary competence, enough to get a hearing in academic settings, and which don't. Pretty much every piece of syllabus design, teaching delivery, academic writing, refereeing, publishing, and visiting speaker planning rests on a foundation of these judgements.

Participants in an academic field are within their rights, then, to argue that particular ideas and arguments are outside the bounds of appropriate disciplinary attention. It's then up to all of us to assess the charges. We should do this carefully, open-mindedly, and in a way that resists the vices of in-group ignorance.³ And yes, it will also help if charges of incompetence aren't tossed about willy-nilly – if people pause and take a deep breath before calling for disliked views to be academically exiled. Still, academic communities had better have the capacity to tell the difference between credible charges of incompetence, and those that are just Moralism masquerading as critique. I suppose I'm more optimistic than Lang is about whether this capacity remains intact, overall, in today's academic communities. (It's also worth asking: if this capacity *isn't* intact, then wouldn't a surge in crypto-Moralistic no platforming be the least of our worries?)

Part of Lang's dissatisfaction with our defence of Academic no platforming is that it's dodging one of the pressing questions in the vicinity. How *should* we deal with Moralistic no platforming? Lang's sketch of an answer is attractive. He acknowledges, helpfully, that there's a need for pragmatic give-and-take. He also suggests – more controversially, but again, helpfully – that feelings of offense and disrespect can receive some consideration, in how we do the give-and-take. If having certain speakers on campus “would lead to feelings among audiences of unsafety... or the conviction that they have been shown gross disrespect,” this may “increase disaffection among students and some faculty, thereby making it less likely that these individuals will engage productively and willingly with others in the academic community.”

I agree. To say this isn't to deny that the university's core purposes are inquiry and knowledge. It's to recognise that we're pursuing these things communally, and that communities need some degree of respect and moderation in order to hold together. There are complex balancing acts to be figured out, and hard choices to face.⁴

Still, Lang says, “the proper management of these issues isn't fundamentally concerned with competence or the maintenance of intellectual standards.” I guess it depends on exactly what we mean by *fundamental*. As I said above, the reason Holocaust denialism lies outside the bounds of serious academic discourse isn't only that it's Antisemitic, but also that it's complete intellectual bunk. The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for scientific racism. It's primarily political opposition that leads to climate change denialism being no platformed at universities, but the fact that it's built on a bed of anti-scientific, conspiratorial lies lends support to the widespread view that this ostracism is justifiable.

What do these examples indicate? Roughly, they indicate that our ethical and intellectual reasons for gatekeeping interact – not always, but fairly often. And when they do interact, their interaction isn't some unaccountable coincidence. If the Holocaust denier's factual claims were true then their denialism *wouldn't be*

rank bigotry. The abhorrence of their view is intimately tied to the patent indefensibility of its intellectual / academic foundations.

In sum, then, the management of these issues – that is: the work of deciding how the curation and platforming of speaking events at universities is handled, and when it may be guided by considerations of respect, safety, inclusion, etc. – plausibly *does* relate to the maintenance of intellectual standards. The question is how the relata fit together. Our defence of Academic no platforming isn't a final answer to that question. But it does some real work in explaining why academic gate-keeping and adjacent considerations need to be part of the answer.

I'll finish by commenting on Lang's remarks about open debate and liberal optimism. He says "traditional assumptions about what universities stand for make fullest sense against a background of liberal optimism, in which we can make... intellectual progress by talking things over." And he worries what will happen if "many members of academic communities... become disenchanted with this broadly liberal vision."

I think these are the right sorts of questions for us to wrestle with. But I want to pull apart some things that seem to be welded together in Lang's framing of the issue. There are different ways of envisioning liberal progress, and different forms of discursive disenchantment. I would ask: what sort of "talking things over" are we, or should we be, vesting our hopes in? Is it a no-holds-barred, Millian free-for-all? Or is it more like the expert back-and-forth that characterises serious scholarly discourse in a mature field? To put the question another way: is it more like a debate on X / Twitter, or more like a debate in the pages of a high-quality and scrupulously-edited journal? The right answer may well be "a mix of the two." In which case my next question would be: "what's the best role for universities to play in helping to achieve the right mixture?"⁵

Maybe I'm pulling the wool over my own eyes, but I'm pretty sure that I do have a healthy liberal optimism that we can make progress by talking things over. But I don't think the more naïve Millian forms of that optimism have a lot going for them. I think societies have a better chance of making progress if they set up *some* discursive venues in which attempts at "talking things over" have more onerous barriers to entry, and are governed by more exacting intellectual standards – more exacting than the ones that govern debates on Twitter, on talk radio, at family gatherings, or at the pub.

You could see this as a pessimistic view. But it's better seen as a way of reviving *a form of* liberal optimism, among the ranks of those who've lost faith in the pollyannaish social epistemic hopes that underpin classical liberal ideas of the university and its discursive norms. Universities do contribute to progress by making spaces for talking things over. When this works it's often *because of* academic gate-keeping, and the way it makes our debates unlike the ones on social media or at the pub. To see no platforming through this lens isn't to call for disenchantment.

It's about offering a different vision of how universities contribute to intellectual progress by means of debate.

¹ See Amia Srinivasan and Robert Mark Simpson, "No Platforming" in Jennifer Lackey (Ed.), *Academic Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018): 186-209.

² Robert C. Post, *Democracy, Expertise, Academic Freedom: A First Amendment Jurisprudence for the Modern State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Michele Moody-Adams, "What's So Special About Academic Freedom?" in Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan R. Cole (Eds.), *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

³ I have in mind the kind of vices, especially ones linked to active ignorance, that Jose Medina theorises (especially in Chapters 1 and 2 of) *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴ I offer some thoughts on how to approach these choices, and what they indicate about the ethical foundations of the university, in Robert Mark Simpson, "Doing Collective Inquiry Better – The Alignment between Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Academic Freedom/Free Speech in UK universities," *Advance Higher Education*, 18th October 2023; <https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/doing-collective-inquiry-better-alignment-between-equality-diversity-and-inclusion>.

⁵ These are rhetorical questions for the purposes of this piece, but I do a bit of work to try to defend the answers I'm hinting at in Robert Mark Simpson, "The Relation Between Academic Freedom and Free Speech," *Ethics* 130/3 (2020): 287-319.