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Stanley Fish, the Meaning of Academic Freedom and Social Responsibility

Peter Bowal^{*}

Discussing academic freedom is similar to discussing freedoms of other essences – one is challenged to enumerate and master its many themes and nuances. Professor Fish’s *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution*,¹ a self-styled “thesis book”, is a literature review that offers one of the most robust analyses on the subject to date.

Such negotiable nuances, in the form of distinctions and definitions, present themselves early in Fish’s book. Some observers, for example, would not fundamentally distinguish between “the advancement of knowledge”² and “the search for truth.”³ They would prefer to view them as the same thing. On the other hand, Fish’s definition of improper influence in the academy is unimpeachable: distortions “by the interests of outside constituencies . . . that have something other than the search for truth in mind.”⁴

Moving beyond definitions, Fish asserts that “no higher, supervening, authority undergirds” the pursuit of knowledge and truth.⁵ One of those insalubrious external influences, the proverbial elephant in the classroom, remains corporate funding or, more precisely, the influence and priorities purchased by it. Yet, the horse has bolted the barn on that issue because long past is the day where any post-secondary institution in the western world functioned without a penny of private money. Even if an institution remained wholly publicly funded, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the sponsoring government, political party or ministry was wholly free of political will. That political aspiration is apt to seep into regulation, overseer appointments and the funding flows.

A more questionable premise of pure academic freedom is the political philosophy of individual academic faculty members. The academic self is inherently, and often unknowingly, captive to ideology and worldview. Academic institutions and the academic enterprise are focused on the

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¹ STANLEY FISH, *VERSIONS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM: FROM PROFESSIONALISM TO REVOLUTION* (forthcoming 2014) (on file with FIU Law Review).

² *Id.* (manuscript at 33).

³ *Id.* (manuscript at 85).

⁴ *Id.* (manuscript at 86).

⁵ *Id.*

creation of human-made solutions to policy and scientific problems. The power and triumph of the human mind to not only find the best way forward, using public money where possible, but then to hasten to intervene and apply these solutions to life problems bespeaks of a more liberal, secular, humanist inclination than might be observed as representative outside of the academy.

Another element of academic freedom under scrutiny is whether society can permit, without limitation, high priced and tenured academics to freely steer their own research agenda throughout their careers without any regard for the needs of the society that support them. The classical economic theory in play is that an unfettered market of ideas and research over a large population of academics will produce an optimum balance of new, socially-useful knowledge. However, to illustrate with a fanciful example, can all members of a department take a lifelong research interest in questions that bear no direct salience whatsoever to the community in which they derive all their support? How long will community needs be allayed by the assurance that somewhere in the world solutions are being found for its problems?

Indeed, as Fish demonstrates, the dance of academic freedom occurs along the edges and extremes of human endeavor. The single most engaged concern about academic freedom in North America today is one that Fish does not analyze at length: the inter-relationship between academic freedom and tenured job security. Academic freedom, like its analogues in the legal system of attorney-client privilege and judicial independence, redounds to social interests and not to the preservation of the individual academic, or lawyer and judge, respectively. It is too often asserted as a shield to defend behaviors unrelated to genuine academic inquiry.