

What Is a University, and Do We Need It?

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In this talk, I am going to suggest a contemporary working definition of a university, according to which it is an institution of higher education within which research and teaching are organized and directed at the discretion of individuals who are selected on meritocratic principles according to their academic achievements. Since the nineteenth century, academic freedom thus understood has emerged as a central feature of universities that distinguishes them from other organizations engaged in teaching and research. Do universities in this sense still offer a commendable way of organizing teaching and research in present day circumstances? I am going to discuss two kinds of challenges. The first kind can be stylized as Principal-Agent Problems, according to which university scientists act as agents on behalf of a principal (“the public”), but information asymmetry prevents the principal from effectively controlling that the agents’ work is in the public interest. Much of science policy of the last decades can be understood as trying to come to terms with Principal-Agent Problems, and is usually (and often quite explicitly) not based on the assumption that academic freedom provides a way to their solution. A second kind of problem can be summarized as “Unchecked Privilege Problems”. The assumption that academic freedom is required to ensure good education and research is based on the idea that it leads to a productive diversity of ideas and to a free exchange of arguments and critique. However, this presupposes that under conditions of academic freedom, different positions have a fair chance of being heard. But university professors, who are the primary beneficiaries of academic freedom, do not adequately represent society in its actual diversity in terms of socio-economic background and class, gender and other aspects of identity. Moreover, principles of academic freedom are also regularly used to protect statements that are apt (e.g. due to their open or concealed misogynic or racist content) to lead individual students to perceive the university as a hostile environment and thereby impair their learning conditions. I am going to discuss whether traditional philosophical justifications of academic freedom (both epistemological arguments and arguments from political philosophy) hold up to the challenges of Principal-Agent Problems as well as Unchecked Privilege Problems.