

Wandering Through the Hollow Desert, and Other Sources of Graduate Angst

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As a means of introducing my topic, allow me a brief recollection: During the academic year 2016-2017 I was a graduate fellow at the Center for the Humanities at Temple University (CHAT), an organization that aims to develop interdisciplinary relationships among both the faculty and graduate students within the College of Liberal Arts. As part of our Fellowship duties I and my graduate colleagues were tasked with organizing a one-day “event” (more on the scare quotes below) that would feature a few distinguished speakers. Our first order of business was, of course, to decide on a theme, and we eventually settled on a meta issue of sorts, a topic that reached across our various domains of inquiry: the *self*-censorship of academia.

We wanted to leave the particulars fairly open-ended, but our overall hope was to generate a discussion about the conservative attitudes toward both content and methods within the professional scholarly community of the Humanities, the means by which such strictures are enforced, and ways for generating productive transgressions. Our mildly saucy title was, “That’s Not What We Do Here!” As a case in point of our theme, we organizers had a not inconsiderable exchange regarding the appropriate nomenclature for our “event.” We all considered “conference” to be an industry default, but, for precisely that reason, we had con-

cerns about the conventional, “normalizing” expectations that the term would enact on both speakers and audience. Something less tendentious, more informal, like “roundtable,” was proposed, but that struck us as *too* informal.

It was finally concluded that “symposium” hit on the right amount of legitimacy without restricting the exact form of the presentations or the kind of engagement between the attendees. We even struggled with the use of punctuation in the symposium’s title, viz., whether to use an interrobang. (We didn’t; it was judged overly flip.) I’ll leave off with the reminiscences at this point, because the actual scholarly product of our symposium is mostly oblique to my main interest. It is simply the theme itself, or, more accurately, the significance of our selecting it that concerns me.

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“That’s Not What We Do Here!”**

Now, the very notion of censorship within the Humanities academy is so shocking that I should be quite clear about my claims and evidence. For one thing, I will not be operating with any technical notion of censorship that, when applied to academia, yields the counterintuitive result that it engages in the practice. What I offer is far more informal, a report of some conjectural conclusions drawn from my own experiences. In that vein, however, I don’t have any scandalous tales to tell of “powers that be” within the Humanities actively repressing or altering work that runs contrary to an orthodox view. Nor did any of my colleagues. And even if I were to have an exposé to air regarding some specific scurrilous act, what better evidence for the *lack* of censorship (on any meaningful construal) within the Humanities broadly could one proffer than the fact that it supports its most junior members calling into question its own procedures?

Finally, at a time in which authoritarian ideologues across the globe advocate (if not implement) real acts of censorship, to talk of the “self-censorship” of the academy without substantive claims is, at best, tone deaf. I cannot deny that the term “self-censorship” is provocative, perhaps unduly so, and that the actual instances I am to cite are too benign to withstand scrutiny when compared with the outrages against free speech drawn from daily news. Still, it is a liberty that I request for the moment to help you to see my larger concerns.

Alright then, *disclaimers* aside, what are the claims regarding the “self-censorship” within the Humanities academy? The argument is this:

1. Academia conceived broadly as the institutions chiefly tasked with the pursuit of truth, knowledge, and understanding, tends to conserve arguments, procedures, and topics that have proven fruitful.
2. Academia possesses a “publish or perish” ethos. The conjunction of 1 and 2 generates:
3. Pressures on vulnerable and insecure members of the academic community to conform their projects to the demands of the professional market.
4. Graduate students are vulnerable and insecure members of the academic community; ergo:
5. Graduates students are subject to the “conforming” pressures of 3.

I provide anecdotal evidence for premises 1 – 4 below shortly, but even granting them, there is clearly a missing premise:

1. the “conforming” pressures of 3 and 5 are sufficient conditions of “censorship.”

As noted above, I will not go that far. But insofar as graduate students alter their speech and work not because doing so conduces to better results and experiences but because it is the only way to maintain their membership within the community, something approaching “censorship” does not seem inapt. Still, I have no interest to enter into a terminological dispute, and, since nothing in 1 – 5 depends on it, I will not insist on it.

What does interest me here are the “conforming pressures” of 5. I find it telling that

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roughly a dozen of us graduate fellows, at different stages in our graduate careers, from departments across the college, could vouch for the existence of this phenomenon, this “self-censorship of academia” (or whatever it should be called), if nothing else. I also believe that our experiences were not unusual or the product of exceptionally strained relations with our respective departments. As noted above, none of us had bombshell accusations to drop from our departmental life. (In fact, we all thought pretty highly of our departments supporting our work, myself included.) In section II below I trace out the impact of these in my own experience. But for the moment I need to mount evidence for accepting the argument to 5.

Regarding claim 1, that academia tends to be conservative, consider the following: although it is rhetorical, who hasn’t heard from members of the profession statements along the lines of, “Well, ok, but you’re not doing real . . .” (fill in your home field), or, “I don’t really have anything to say about this sort of work,” or the always relevant prudential guidance, “If

that's what you want to do, fine, but you'll have trouble on the job market."

All of these might be both true and entirely well meaning. Yet the illocutionary force of the statements seems plainly enough to do some conforming or restricting work, to conserve the accepted practices and areas of research within the discipline. To share my own story, when choosing my dissertation topic, I received the last bit of advice regarding the market and ultimately selected a project that I thought would be easily recognized as "philosophy."

These were, of course, hardly my only considerations, and I would not quite say that I regret the decision. Nor, to be clear, do I mean to imply that I was coerced in the slightest or that anyone behaved improperly by offering me these views. If anything, it would be untoward not to share one's more experienced views of the "conditions on the ground" within the profession. This is just the state of play.

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I still cannot help but wonder how my experiences might have been different. Surely everyone pursuing advanced degrees goes through some self-doubt, at some point asks themselves why they are still doing this. My topic has become just an intellectual puzzle to me, one for which, so far as I can tell, no one is clamoring for a solution. But still I persist, not so much from the force of my desire to solve it, but from revulsion at the thought of quitting after all this time.

Now this sort of hearsay and anecdotal evidence is unconvincing by itself, and I doubt that anything remotely approaching censorship is to be found in it. But it is consistent with 1.

There are, however, broader considerations in favor of 1. For if academia is the institution that seeks truth, knowledge, and understanding, it is hard to see how it could fail to be conservative. Not just any argument is sound, not just any method of inquiry is consistently fruitful, not just any expression is felicitous. Those that have satisfied our tribunals are rightfully cherished, and any would-be contender should face a heavy burden of proof.

Objections regarding the unbalanced membership of the tribunal and the potentially biasing effects this has on its judgments are now commonplace, but even were we to achieve an equitable arrangement, certain methods of inquiry and areas of content will be normalized because of their past success. The Humanities are peopled by humans, so mistakes will be made under even the most fortuitous circumstances.

Oversight is always a possibility. But given the inherently self-critical nature of Humanities study, champions of erroneously or unjustly marginalized projects can (ideally) always continue to press their case within the Humanities community. In any event, the case for the "conservativeness" of academia is that exploration and experimentation are both necessary for our continued existence *and* sources of peril.

Academic institutions provide a safe space that reduces the dangers of exploration. For academia to provide meaningful educational experiences, it must challenge the original impulsive expressions and intuitions of its members. (If those impulses were routinely successful, there would be no need for the institutions in the first place!) And it does this, at least in part, by pressing its members to demonstrate how their novel answers perform better than the prevailing views.

There are then two arguments for the conservativeness of academia, claims 1. The latter claims that the enterprise of seeking truth,

knowledge and understanding itself forces us to act “conservatively,” while the former posits the market pressures (those of both the “marketplace of ideas” and the actual job market) that push members to pursue a conservative path. As for claim 2, the publish or perish ethos of academia, I take it that there is not a great deal of argument required. I interpret “publish” broadly to include anything that one might do to build their CV and demonstrate their activity in the field. To maintain standing in the community one must be active in professionally recognized, *quantifiable* ways.

“Perish” need not mean that one falls into total disrepute or is otherwise ostracized. But it does mean that without a superior record of one’s public, easily quantified successes (first and foremost peer-reviewed journal entries) compared to one’s peers, career options are greatly diminished. It is certainly possible to string along a series of “part-time” or “visiting” positions, but they often create a vicious cycle of demands on one’s time and energies that prevent developing the CV, which puts them even further behind on the path to security. In short, it is unclear how one can live a life of the mind or remain within the academic community without constantly planning for the next publication.

I don’t intend any of the foregoing as an attack on the practice of publishing or the import it is given professionally. We need to share our results and subject them to trials of reason for the continuing growth of both the species and the individual. My aim is rather to draw attention to the fact that, as far as I can see, there are few if any ways of remaining within the community while leading a stable life without prioritizing publishable projects.

For instance, I have taught nine classes in a calendar year while researching my dissertation. I had a colleague report teaching eight classes *in a semester* to properly care for a young family.

The teaching of courses and the student evaluations that follow are certainly quantifiable, but I don’t believe that these contributions to the field, to say nothing of our civilization, are given any significant merit.

But what am I to do? There is not much demand of which I am aware for “aspiring interlocutors” or “developers of humanity”—certainly not if price point is a reliable indicator. Aside from some scattered scholars concerned with the future of the profession whom I personally know, and a few professional committees of which I am aware, I am not sure how widely this is considered to be a problem within the profession. This is not to say that there is not more being done in the profession with respect to these concerns than I have suggested, but I, at least, have to go *looking* for it. It is not on the tip of everyone’s tongue. “Publish or perish,” as far as I can tell, continues to be the academic motto.

This “tension,” and the temptation to relieve it by abandoning one’s own spark of interest, is the closest that the argument comes to “censorship.”

I don’t pretend that my reflections present anything like knockdown evidence for either of the first two claims, but I hope that I have provided enough to warrant the remainder of the argument. If you are willing to grant that proper membership in the academy is only likely for thinkers who regularly publish in professional venues *and* that the academic enterprise is, for various reasons, conservative, then it is plausible that there is pressure to generate research projects that are conservative.

An obvious objection to this conclusion is that nothing is quite so celebrated in academia writ large, and certainly so in the Humanities, as a “paradigm changing” argument. The only sure-fire way to secure a position in the academy is to present a case that stands accepted wisdom or prevailing theories on their head. The search for the golden child genius, dropped from the sky, is always on. But, be that as it may, being a genius is not something that anyone could plan for themselves, and it seems close to a contradiction in terms to speak of a “community of geniuses.” In the incalculable likelihood that I am not a genius, the pressure to publish, to remain a member of the community, inclines me to seek out a safe topic and conform to the professional expectations as best I can. The force of this is hardly compulsive, but it is a felt tension, a quiet droning presence that creepingly encroaches on my sense of self the longer I remain in the margins.

This “tension,” and the temptation to relieve it by abandoning one’s own spark of interest, is the closest that the argument comes to “censorship.” As I noted above, if this doesn’t satisfy whatever our proper definition of censorship turns out to be, I am more than obliged to find another term. Nonetheless, I believe something like this slow extinguishing of personal inspiration by the internalized “other” of the academy is what I and my colleagues had in mind when we developed our symposium on the “*self*-censorship of academia.”

Like all forms of censorship, the matter is not determined by what is said, but by the process by which it is said. If, after a long line of dead-end investigations and false-start arguments, a cycle of periodic self-doubt and insight that triggers reevaluation and redefinition, a researcher arrives at a defensible position, at least for the time being, that is education. But when the search for a defensible position is a product of seeking a safe haven, of sticking to a line that

comes highly recommended from within the profession *for that reason*, of giving over one’s project as ransom for protection, then censorship or not, we have reached my concern.

II

The last link in the line of reasoning concerns 4: graduate students are vulnerable and insecure members of the Humanities academic community.

Similar to the “publish or perish” claim, I don’t think this stands in need of much defense, except perhaps for some clarification. It might be bruited that graduate students are not proper members of the academic community at all, or that, at best, they are something like “provisional members.” I see the situation as more complicated.

Graduate students are a “*tertium quid*” of a sort. They’re not quite proper members of the academy, but they’re not quite students or lay-people, either. The former have the security and legitimization, at least in principle, to develop means for transcending or neutralizing the effects of “self-censorship,” the pressures to produce safe work. The latter can either abandon the institutions that would not or could not engage with them, or just go along with the program laid out for them; Fight, or flight, or acquiesce.

Now in the case of undergraduate students, this latter option is often more than appropriate. Students at this stage of life are often in need of direction and/or simple instruction, or, as I have seen with some regularity, simply seek a baccalaureate to secure a higher standing on the labor market. This is not meant as an insult; many folks know what they want to do with themselves and see the degree-granting institution as a means to their ends.

But none of these are promising options for the graduate student. Despite the fact that the standard activities of graduate students are strikingly similar to those of full-fledged members of the profession—carrying on a research project (which is validated only with publishable results), actively cultivating relationships within their scholarly community (both locally and abroad), leading the undergraduate population (commonly as instructors or TAs, at the very least as a kind of “elder sibling”), often performing some amount of administrative functions (serving on various committees), arranging suitable living arrangements outside campus, and, hopefully, being remunerated for all this—graduate students rarely have the security of full-fledged members to resist the pressures of abandoning their personal stake in their projects. Without that protection, fight is a tall order.

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On the other hand, they have already committed themselves to a certain life project that depends upon the resources of the academic profession. Abandoning it is only a final act of self-preservation. There’s no fleeing, certainly not while remaining a graduate student or a member of the academic community.

There is a third path, one that the graduate student must follow, but it is bounded by poles: resignation or acquiescence on the one side, pretensions of genius on the other. The chief challenge of graduate life is to stay to the middle of the middle path. There are, to be sure, occasions in the career of the graduate student wherein acquiescing, following a well-trodden path, taking a spectator’s role in one’s life, is an

appropriate response. If nothing more, than bare instruction is required or helpful.

But these become rarer the further one advances. The graduate student is not simply a mature student. They are more like, as noted above, a fledgling professional. One becomes a graduate student because *mere* instruction was not sufficient in their life. Their projects have not been satisfied, and so they search for a more robust set of tools. To leave one’s project unresolved, to resign one’s stake in the project, and to allow the outcome to be governed by external forces, or, conversely, to insist upon one’s unadulterated vision, are the twin sirens that signal the end of education.¹

Either of these result in what I call, for lack of a better term, a “hollowing” of experience. And whatever the psychological or spiritual damage suffered personally as the result of succumbing to the pressures of the graduate experience along these lines, the strain is passed along to the profession. “Truth,” “knowledge,” and “understanding” become possessions of a select few who themselves suffer endlessly in a society that obstinately refuses to see the beacon of light from the ivory tower. In times of crisis, when the profession stands in need of defending itself, its feet of clay are exposed, as its best arguments fall on the same supposedly deaf and dumb ears that fled from them.

To be as clear as I can, this is not a call to free graduate student life from the shackles of the professoriate. Far from it. Some projects are best left unpursued, or at the very least substantially modified, and it is the proper role of professional academia to guide the graduate student away from rocky shoals. I take this process of discovery, the mutual engagement of expertise matched with emerging challenges, to be

¹ For a broader discussion of these twin threats in life generally, see the “Introduction” to Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct*, (Modern Library: New York), 1922.

true education. And education, as opposed to instruction, is the process by which we discover how both our means and ends must be modified in light of our broadening understanding of the environs in which we find ourselves.

On this construal, educational institutions exist to enable a similar sort of adjustment of ourselves and alteration of our environs so that we may thrive with a minimum of scarring. This process just is the search for truth.² But given the current conditions of the professional academy, it is the plight of the graduate student to possess the fewest protections at the stage of their greatest insecurity, at the time when the threat of hollowing looms large. In my own, shall we say politely, protracted experiences as a graduate student, both the “graduate” and the “student” component must be carefully guarded to ensure a full educational experience.

First, the graduate student as “graduate”: as noted earlier, one of the standard responsibilities of graduate students is to act as a graduate, that is, as a member of a community with maturer powers than those of the student population. These can be realized in any number of ways: as a professor of classes, a teaching assistant, a mentor, a discussion leader, more or less any position that bestows some privilege upon the graduate.

The graduate student without question has a greater expertise in their field than their undergraduate cohorts, but the graduate is still only a fledgling. The pressures of grading and lecturing while not being extended the full privileges of the fully-fledged professional—the leeway that students tend to allow professors regarding unconventional methods or strategies (that they don’t allow graduate students)—can yield hollowing reactions. We might teach

something because it is easy or because we are comfortable with it, not because we think it important or that it will generate the most meaningful learning experiences for the students.

I myself find the grading process to be notably difficult. With or without a grading rubric, the assigning of a point value to an essay or writing assignment is almost always somewhat arbitrary. The particularly cagey undergraduate can press this to their advantage by disputing any given grade. This is true no matter who the instructor is, of course, but negative reviews from undergraduate students threaten the graduate student’s very livelihood.

Now, to be sure, there is nothing untoward in questioning a grade. After all, the undergraduate student’s future is just as much at stake. But the point is to examine the kind of interaction created by the dispute. Is there a compromise reached, or a genuine exchange of views that deepens mutual understanding? Or are both parties trying to quash the other’s position? Because of their lack of experience and lack of institutional support, hollowing impulses tempt the graduate.

To make matters worse, the undergraduate may have already acquiesced themselves; that is, already habituated themselves to look on the professor as an *instructor*, as someone to be submitted to and from whom to expect a level of expertise and polish unlikely to be possessed by the graduate student. As with all situations, this could go either way: it could serve as a moment of enlightenment and discovery for both the undergraduate and graduate students, or the pieces could fall where they may with both parties reluctant to engage the other in the future.

Next, the graduate student as “student”: the graduate student, for all the responsibilities of being a graduate, is still a student. (Indeed, in accord with the earlier claims about “true” edu-

² See John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, reprinted in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 12. Ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Southern Illinois University Press: Carbondale), 1986.

cation, they may be the only “real” students—insofar as education begins when instruction ends.) And being students, they face all the infantilizing pressures ubiquitous to student life: the “sibling rivalries” that result from competing for the attention and approval of the “parental” faculty, who hold one’s very future in their hands. One must find a way to stand out, but, unlike actual infants, only socially (read: professionally) accepted forms of expression elicit meaningful attention.

Mere repetition of the master is the act of the undergraduate. But the implacable genius,

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proclaiming truth and destroying established norms and practices in the bargain, will not do either. The ultimate tension of graduate life is that one must stand out, just not *too* much. As I’ve heard it said in a different context, it is something like approaching a cliff: the game is to go as far as you can without falling over the edge. Graduate work must walk the line between being too banal and too free-wheeling (like, say, this essay).³

Perhaps it falls for the latter more than the former, yet given the relative immaturity of the student and high value of genius work, this is unsurprising.

III

The defense of the argument for the “self-censorship of academia” is now complete. It is presented informally, anecdotally sourced, and

almost entirely the product of reflections on my own career. If you find it at all compelling or even somewhat plausible, then I hope you see that the heart of the whole matter turns on the capacity of the Humanities institutions to create educational environments that foster a “middle ground” experience, that enable graduate students to retain their sense of self in their own projects while those projects are reoriented to produce more meaningful results, and that stifle the “hollowing” urges.

I don’t pretend to have offered anything like the requisite evidence to secure fully warranted assent. But I think there is enough here to demonstrate the need for a meaningful reflection on the reasons for graduate studies and how we can better manage the stressors that might yield hollowed reactions. In addressing these we will be forced to consider the broader issues concerning the kinds of persons whom higher education seeks to develop, and what sorts of skills might help in the continuing search for truth, knowledge, and understanding. The “self-censorship” of academia, the hollowing threat, answers these questions for us, but at the price of losing what we sought from education in the first place: a broadened, fuller version of ourselves.

For those of you familiar with John Dewey’s views on education and experience, I take it that none of the foregoing strikes you as *outré*. My own position is greatly indebted to Dewey’s, but I have avoided directly applying any of his views or arguments explicitly to prevent this being misread as a poorly cited historical essay. What’s more, the argument provided regarding the academy’s self-censorship and its “hollowing” effects on graduate students does not live or die with any specific claim of Dewey’s (I don’t think).

In accord with Dewey’s thought, we might say that the problems of education are the problems of existence. We cannot eradicate the

³ See, for further thoughts in this line, William James’s essay “The Ph.D. Octopus,” reprinted in *Memories and Studies*, ed. Henry James Jr., (The Floating Press), 2012.

threats at their roots; we would eliminate ourselves in the bargain. The need for constant growth and “inter-action” with our environs, the constant urge to withdraw from the engagement (to become “hollow,” as I have it) and let “nature take its course” on us, this is all the price of admission.

The best that we can do is to be on guard to nip self-censorship in the bud by engaging graduate students and their work more regularly with an eye to the “hollowing” forces, and keeping the long-term ends of education, more fulfilling experiences, consistently in view.

I’ve heard the A.B.D. years described more than once as a “wandering in the desert.”⁴ The evocative descriptive “hollow” was influenced by the imagery of the phrase. I wander in an alien landscape that offers little protection from its various threats. The environment continues to be largely indifferent to any particular person’s survival, a strain that even the best help from well-wishers and more experienced fellow travelers does little to allay.

All directions look the same, but only one, and I know not which, leads to a more fruitful place. Perhaps the experience will prove life-affirming in the long run, but it seems just as possible that it is merely something I survive.

At the very least I see now why the air here is so thin and dry; this is the highest plateau of education, after all.

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versity in 2016-17. He is a founding member of the "Future of Philosophical Practice" working group, a collection of philosophers seeking new methods and arenas for the work of philosophy. His dissertation, entitled, "Reasons, Causes, and Akrasia," explores "weakness of will" through the lens of non-Humean accounts of action.

⁴ Thanks to Paul Crowe for sharing the phrase, as well as his own experiences, with me.