Report on the State of Scholarship in the Humanities and the Humanistic Social Sciences

Paul Boghossian, Chair
Silver Professor of Philosophy, New York University

Kwame Anthony Appiah
Silver Professor of Philosophy and Law, New York University

Kit Fine
University Professor, Silver Professor of Philosophy and Mathematics, New York University

Joseph Henrich
Ruth Moore Professor of Biological Anthropology and Professor of Human Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University

Katherine E. Fleming
Professor of History, New York University, and President and CEO, J. Paul Getty Trust

Jason Merchant
Lorna Puttkammer Straus Distinguished Service Professor of Linguistics, University of Chicago

Gary Saul Morson
Lawrence B. Dumas Professor of the Arts and Humanities; Professor, Slavic Languages and Literatures, Northwestern University

Gideon Rosen
Stuart Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University

Ashley Rubin
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Hawaii

Sean Wilentz
George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of American History, Princeton University

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Preface

This report is addressed to university chancellors and presidents who are concerned about the state of academic scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences and who may wish, within their purview, to promote excellent scholarship in these vital fields. The charge to the committee, submitted in August 2025 and formulated by Daniel Diermeier, Chancellor of Vanderbilt University, and Andrew D. Martin, Chancellor of Washington University, reads as follows:

> As chancellors and presidents working to restore trust in higher education, we are concerned about the dramatic erosion of support for the humanities and humanistic social sciences amongst students, parents and government officials, as well as by the steady drumbeat of complaints about the deterioration of scholarly standards within those disciplines.
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> The complaints have been various in nature. Several scientists have alleged over the years that there is widespread misunderstanding and misuse of natural science in the work of prominent humanists. Philosophers have worried about the unquestioning embrace of problematic philosophical views, especially those concerning truth, evidence and knowledge. More recently, many different voices have suggested that humanistic disciplines have allowed background ideological values to distort the objective pursuit of knowledge in those fields.
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> To help us assess whether, and to what extent, there is a problem here, we charge a commission of eminent scholars from these disciplines to examine the state of scholarly work in their respective areas and to evaluate whether these allegations are justified. We are concerned that, without such an examination, the well-documented erosion of support for the humanities will continue unabated.

Chancellors Diermeier and Martin presented the charge to Paul Boghossian, who assembled the following scholars to work as an independent group to address the issues raised in the charge:

Kwame Anthony Appiah, Silver Professor of Philosophy and Law, New York University

Paul Boghossian, Silver Professor of Philosophy, New York University

Kit Fine, University Professor, Silver Professor of Philosophy and Mathematics, New York University

Joseph Henrich, Ruth Moore Professor of Biological Anthropology and Professor of Human Evolutionary Biology, Harvard University

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Sean Wilentz, George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of American History, Princeton University

The committee began its work in September of 2025. In the initial phase we compiled detailed internal reports on what we take to be a representative sample of disciplines in these areas: philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies and music studies. These reports were the result of extensive research on the part of the authors in consultation with experts in fields unrepresented on the committee, with the indispensable assistance of Gavin Cook and Yu Guo, who developed tools for gathering and analyzing data relevant to the work of the committee.[1] These internal reports form the basis for the general report to follow, which is signed by all members of the committee.

1 We are also grateful to Darren Reisberg, vice chancellor of Vanderbilt University, Leigh Bond and Lauren Williamson for their help in advancing the committee's work.

1. Introduction

We presume that our readers recognize the value of the humanistic disciplines and their central place in the modern research university. The humanities and the social sciences take as their subject matter human culture and society, in the past, present and future. Their common aim is to help us understand the human world and to develop in their students the capacity to participate intelligently in society, to comprehend their place in history, to appreciate the great works of the imagination, and also to identify the most significant defects in human life and their sustaining causes. Our starting point is the shared conviction that scholarship of this sort has contributed immeasurably to our understanding, and that society benefits from the resources it devotes to these academic disciplines (§2 below).

The report is prompted by the widespread sense that, despite their value and their promise, the humanistic disciplines are in trouble. It is, of course, widely recognized that undergraduate enrollments in these disciplines have plummeted and that there have been numerous complaints about the content of syllabi.[2] However, with rare exceptions, our committee has not focused on these issues. Our concern has rather been the quality of academic scholarship in this domain.

Scholarship on matters of human concern has been a source of controversy from the start — witness the trial of Socrates for corrupting the youth of Athens. In recent years, however, the complaint has assumed a more specific form, namely, that the traditional goal of coming to understand the human world through careful scholarship has been subordinated to, or even displaced by, a "political" goal: the aim of realizing a conception of social justice nowadays associated with the progressive left. More specifically, the complaint is that scholarly standards for the assessment of academic work have been distorted within these disciplines both to privilege work on topics that are taken to be relevant to social justice, and much more importantly, to replace more traditional standards for assessing academic scholarship with political standards designed to ensure that only politically acceptable work is published, taught and valorized (§3 below). The sharpest version of the complaint traces this distortion in scholarly standards to a pervasive repudiation of the very idea of scholarly objectivity in favor of the view that since claims to knowledge are inevitably ideological, it is fair game to assess academic scholarship on political and social grounds (§4 below). The result of this distortion, the complaint continues, is an academic ecosystem in which much of what passes as scholarship in the humanistic disciplines is in fact a mix of tendentious, biased research, feeble academic agitprop and jargon-laden nonsense. To the extent that this is so, the complaint concludes, these scholarly disciplines can no longer play the valuable role they have traditionally played in the advancement of human knowledge and so risk forfeiting their claims to deference from concerned administrators and support from the wider public (§5 below).

This report aims to assess the state of scholarship in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences in light of this complaint, and the first thing to say is that we reject the complaint in this bald form. As we will emphasize, there is serious scholarship in every field we have studied, and at their best, the humanities and the social sciences are as rigorous and as fruitful as they have ever been. Taken as a whole, however, our review of the disciplines paints a mixed picture. Every field we have studied shows some signs of the pathologies sketched above: a deterioration in scholarly standards fueled by the substitution of political criteria for properly scholarly criteria in the assessment of research and a more general repudiation of long-standing ideals of rigor and objectivity.[3] In some fields (e.g., philosophy) the problems are largely confined

2 American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Bachelor's Degrees in the Humanities,* Humanities Indicators, updated 2024.

3 We must, of course, resist the impulse to idealize the past, as if the humanistic scholarship of 50 or 100 years

to a single subfield focused on a charged topic. In others (e.g., history), while there are streams of scholarship in which standards have been politicized in problematic ways, they run alongside more dominant streams in which a wide range of views is tolerated, and appropriately scholarly standards are brought to bear. In the most extreme cases (e.g., anthropology), we see a widespread deterioration in scholarly standards grounded in a pervasive repudiation of ideals of objectivity together with a toxic intellectual climate in which reasonable dissent on politically charged topics is routinely suppressed and punished.

Several comments on the scope of our findings and their significance are in order. First, while we have focused entirely on the humanities and the humanistic social sciences, there is reason to believe that the problems we have identified exist to some extent in other areas, including the natural sciences. Our report does not speak to these larger issues but may form a useful template for the study of them. Second, within the humanities and social sciences, we have focused exclusively on core academic disciplines represented at research universities by Ph.D.-granting departments in schools of Arts and Sciences rather than the academic work generated by interdisciplinary units of various sorts and by scholars elsewhere in the university, e.g., in schools of education, social work, communications and so forth. There is reason to believe that the problems we have identified in the core disciplines are significantly more serious in some of these allied areas, but we have not studied these issues in detail.[4]

Third, we must stress that our conclusions are provisional. We have attempted a fair assessment of the disciplines we have studied, relying where possible on existing academic work and also on our own efforts to collect and analyze new data concerning the range of published scholarship and its uptake, conference proceedings, statements from professional societies, and so on. We must also stress, however, that the scientific, systematic study of the politicization of academic research is in its infancy. As part of our work, we have begun to develop tools for approaching these questions, which we hope will be fruitful going forward. But with occasional exceptions, our conclusions about the overall state of humanistic scholarship, and in particular about the *extent* of the problems we have identified, are not yet supported by the kind of quantitative evidence that would be expected in a peer-reviewed study of these matters. In this connection we must stress that the examples cited below are meant to illustrate the phenomena we have identified, not to establish their prevalence.

In part for this reason we must urge caution on the part of administrators who might wish to act on the basis of our report. In any well-functioning university, administrators are bound by what we take to be a stringent norm of deference according to which non-expert decision-makers must defer to disciplinary experts in assessing scholarship. Academic disciplines exist for the purpose of producing and certifying this sort of expertise, and any well-run university relies on the expertise of its own faculty and the wider scholarly community whenever the assessment of scholarship is attempted: in the granting of degrees, in the appointment of faculty, in decisions about tenure and promotion, and so on. This norm reflects a wider policy of deference, according to which the academic affairs of individual units (including decisions about what to teach and how to allocate resources for research) are left to the faculty within those units, with administrators intervening only where trade-offs must be made and to implement larger university-level priorities.

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ago were altogether free of political distortion and other forms of bias. The "traditional" standards we allude to are the *norms* endorsed by serious scholars in the recent past, about which more is said below in §3. It must be stressed, however, that however widely accepted these norms may once have been, they have always been flouted in practice to some degree.

4 See Kahlenberg and Lin (2026) for a bracing report on the politicization of scholarship in American Studies.

Our commission exists only because even this foundational principle has its limits. If and when the department of astronomy morphs into the department of astrology, it will at some point make sense for the administration to object. Well before it comes to that, it will make sense for the administration to say, "You are beginning to lose our trust." These issues are familiar and relatively tractable when the problems are confined to individual academic units. Administrators regularly rely on disciplinary experts elsewhere, assembled as review committees, for guidance. When astronomy *as a field* morphs into astrology, on the other hand, administrators will face a largely unprecedented situation in which disciplinary expertise itself cannot be trusted. In such cases, the administration will need advice from minority voices within the discipline and from adjacent disciplines with better standards, and it will be a matter of substantive judgment where such reliable expertise is to be found.

Our report provides ground for thinking that some fields may be at risk of warranting this sort of scrutiny. We have identified problems in the humanities and social sciences to which administrators should be alert. And yet we cannot say on the basis of the work we have done that individual departments have forfeited their claim to administrative deference. If administrators are concerned about these problems in their universities, an indispensable first step will be an intensive study of the units in question conducted by reliably broad-minded disciplinary experts (in-house and external) and by experts in adjacent disciplines who take the problems seriously and can be relied on to take a measured view. *In our view, nothing in this report warrants any intervention more intrusive than such first steps.*

In closing, we wish to emphasize a truth that ought to be self-evident but in some quarters, increasingly, is not: An indispensable condition for serious scholarship in any area is institutional openness to a range of ideas. That openness requires firmly resisting any effort to judge scholarly work based on its conformity to *a priori* ideological constraints. To be sure, political commitments have long inspired excellent work in the humanities, just as they have inspired shoddy work. But the excellence or shoddiness stems not from the politics that may have inspired it but from its intellectual rigor as a contribution to understanding. Likewise, scholars who endeavor to steer away from politics as far as possible have produced excellent as well as shoddy work, based on the same standard. It's that *standard* which matters.

Accordingly, our call for more searching scrutiny of the humanistic disciplines must not be read as a call for replacing ideological scholarship of one sort with ideological scholarship of another sort, or for balancing distorted scholarship on one side with distorted scholarship on the other to achieve neutrality. Not surprisingly, given the broadly liberal sympathies of the modern humanities professoriat, the politicized undermining of scholarly standards we describe is largely associated with the academic left. But the remedy for this cannot be to promote politicized scholarship from the right, let alone to stigmatize and punish serious scholarship from the left. That would be to take a bad situation and make it worse.

This leads to a final note of caution. Our mission has been to examine the dynamics inside specific academic disciplines. We would be remiss, however, if we did not acknowledge how powerful forces outside the academy have taken it upon themselves to shape humanistic scholarship and otherwise impose their own ideological orthodoxy.

Some of this pressure has come from the left, notably in the recent decision by some large private foundations to turn away from traditional funding of scholarship and teaching in order, as the Mellon Foundation announced in 2020, to "prioritize social justice in all of its grantmaking." Smaller conservative foundations, meanwhile, have for many decades attempted to push their own agendas, sometimes described as efforts to save the academy from leftist

domination.[5]

In other ways, political forces stretching from Washington, D.C., to state capitals across the nation are currently attempting to dictate as never before the substance of humanistic teaching and scholarship. Beginning at the end of the 1990s, the watchdog group FIRE (Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression) bravely led the opposition to left-wing illiberalism on college campuses. While it remains vigilant on that front, the group now finds the chief threat coming from the right. "The threats we're seeing right now, to me, often feel damn near existential," FIRE's legal director said in a recent interview. "The incredibly important distinction is that what we're seeing now from the right is backed by the power of the federal government."[6]

In part, this dictation has involved federal efforts to pronounce on what is acceptable scholarship, especially, for the moment, in the field of American history, and to threaten any institution under federal purview that does not conform. The criteria for what is acceptable are ominously vague. One troubling indication, however, comes in the official White House 1776 Commission report, released in 2021, which propounds a view of U.S. history that describes liberal political reform since the Progressive era as a challenge to American values on a par with fascism and communism.

The situation is even more troubling at the state level, where legislative impositions have begun to impinge directly on scholarship and teaching, chiefly by intimidating public colleges and universities. The case of the Texas A&M philosopher instructed by the university to remove selections from Plato from his introductory course syllabus because they violated new rules barring Texas public universities from offering courses that "advocate race and gender ideology" may seem bizarre, but it is also extremely alarming.[7]

To ignore these growing pressures simply because they come from outside the academy leaves a perilously blinkered view of the risks that endanger serious scholarship in the humanities. Administrators who share our concerns are therefore cautioned to resist any temptation or pressure to counter the politicization we have identified with politicized scholarship on the other side. The goal must be to promote a scholarly ecosystem in which academic work is assessed by its capacity to advance our understanding — of society, of the past and of the products of the imagination — by the application of rigorous scholarly standards, all of which are designed, inter alia, to limit the risk of ideological distortion of every sort.

2. An Apologia for the Humanities and Social Sciences

We start from a conviction — as practitioners of a range of these disciplines — that the humanities and the humanistic social sciences are an essential strand in the life of the modern university. This is above all because their study is an important element of a liberal education, which means, since "liberalis" translates "befitting a free person," a preparation for a life as a free citizen. Human minds and hearts are enriched by an understanding of literature, philosophy and the arts, and by the study of the cultural processes that have sustained human communities

5 On the Mellon Foundation's dominant role in funding the humanities and its sharp turn toward funding explicitly left-wing (or "social activist") scholarship, see Tyler Austin Harper, "The Multibillion-Dollar Foundation That Controls the Humanities," *The Atlantic*, February 12, 2026, at https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/2026/03/mellon-foundation-humanities-research-funding/685733/.

6 Zoe Greenberg, "From 'Cancel Culture' Watchdog to Trump Antagonist," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Feb. 14, 2026.

7 Alan Blinder, "Texas A&M, Under New Curriculum Limits, Warns Professor not to Teach Plato," *The New York Times,* Jan. 7, 2026.

across time and space.

There are some who question whether an education in the humanities provides an essential part of the preparation for a free life. After all, you might think that what you most urgently need is to be found in the nomothetic social and natural sciences. Psychology and neuroscience can tell you what it takes for a normal person to achieve satisfaction; economics and political science help you think about what the effects of various public policies will be; physics and chemistry and biology tell us how the world works, so that each of us can take what we want from it.[8]

These things are all true. But who is going to help you decide what satisfactions are really worth pursuing? Which outcomes are worth aiming for? What is worth wanting? Who will help you decide whether John Stuart Mill was right to say that "it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied" (Mill 1985)? Indeed, who will let you know this question is even worth asking? And where will you learn that one reason for studying the nomothetic sciences is that understanding how the universe works and how we fit into it would be worthwhile in itself, even if we never put the knowledge to profitable use?

The answer, we think, is clear. These are the questions you learn to answer, however provisionally, with the help of literature and the arts, critically appreciated, through the study of philosophy and history and sociology and anthropology. Some humanistic disciplines take matters of value and meaning as a central focus; others aim to describe and explain the human world without pronouncing judgment; but all play an indispensable role in refining our conception of what is possible for human beings and which social arrangements we wish to aim for. If these disciplines are to help us answer these important questions, it is crucial that they use the right methods in search of the right answers. Their task is not to manipulate us into following a party line but to provide each free person with the tools for making their own informed choices.

The disciplines we are discussing prepare us for a free life by developing critical thinking and analytical skills, enhancing cultural understanding and empathy in a world of increasing global interconnections, teaching ethical reasoning and civic responsibility, and providing intellectual resources for creativity and innovation. Because their study is intrinsically worthwhile, they contribute directly to the intellectual and imaginative flourishing of those who study them. By defending and investing in the humanistic disciplines, we affirm our commitment to a society that values critical inquiry, empathy and the full spectrum of human potential, all informed by a clear-eyed view of who we are and where we've come from.

Whilst there is no doubt that these disciplines in fact serve many positive social purposes, they serve these purposes best when they do not directly aim at shaping individuals or societies, but rather at understanding the phenomena in their purview. The academic study of social movements is not in service to any particular social movement. If it discovers truths about what makes social movements successful, it is not up to the discipline to use them to advance or retard any particular cause. Even the philosophical study of justice should aim at the *truth* about justice, not directly at producing a world that is just; though the search for an understanding of justice in philosophy of course provides those who learn from it one of the tools for making a better world. That is why we should reject the "noble lie," the notion that we should promote an account of the world because spreading it will make people do the right thing, and not just

8 The neuroscientist Sam Harris takes this view in Harris 2010.

because the view is right.

Our society is riven by disagreements about politics, and consensus, either on the appropriate aims of policy or on the best methods of achieving them, will often be impossible. That is not the relativist point that the correct answers to these questions are different for each person who asks them. It is just a familiar observation about the configuration of the social world. Nevertheless, the humanistic disciplines, and the academy within which they sit, deserve the support of people across the wide range of reasonable disagreement about politics and policy. They deserve it because they do not take it as their aim to support any particular political position. Where the disciplines are relevant to politics, it is because they have developed concepts, theories and ideas in the pursuit of understanding in their field that are relevant to settling the proper aims of policy and the methods that are likely to achieve them. If they are to be trusted to do this, they should not build answers to these disputed political questions into their starting points. That will not, however, mean that they cannot *discover* answers that are relevant to concluding that one or other policy is right. Indeed, that is one — but, as we have insisted, only one — of the reasons why, if they do their job as they should, a wise society will support them.[9]

3. The Nature of the Problem

The idea that there is something amiss in the humanities and the social sciences, and that the problem has something to do with the politicization of research in these areas, is hardly new. Richard Hofstadter (1963) traces American skepticism about the role of university professors in public life to evangelical Protestant suspicion of the "learned clergy" during the Great Awakening of the 18th century. In more recent history, the idea reached a high-water mark during the McCarthy era and another in the 1980s with the publication of best sellers like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (1987) and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (1990). Our report does not attempt to trace the roots of the present-day critique of the academy to these antecedents. Nor does it attempt to engage in detail with contemporary critics of the humanistic academy and its defenders, a sprawling discussion that has taken place mainly online and in the press. Much of that discussion is focused on undergraduate teaching and its social consequences, a topic we address only in passing. Our focus is rather the quality of *scholarship*: the research produced by professors employed by colleges and universities and published (for the most part) in academic journals and scholarly monographs. The critique we take seriously is that this scholarly enterprise has been damaged in recent decades, not just by a general erosion of standards, but also by a reconceptualization of scholarship as a form of political activity, answerable in part to extra-academic standards.

We begin from what ought to be a platitude: The humanities and the social sciences are academic disciplines aimed at understanding the human world and the larger reality of which it is a part. There is room for debate about what it means to "understand" a historical episode, or a

9 There are of course academic disciplines that are designed not merely to promote knowledge, but to advance substantive ends. Medicine aims to promote health; social work aims to promote social welfare and often incorporates a determinate conception of that goal. It is striking that the core disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, at least as traditionally conceived, do not have substantive ends even of this uncontroversial sort as part of their self-conception. The important point, however, is that *all* serious academic disciplines, including those with extra-academic aims, function best when their substantive results and methods are assessed by evidential standards that make no reference to these further aims. Medical research promotes health *by* promoting an accurate understanding of disease. By the same token, the social sciences and the humanities promote whatever extra-academic aims their practitioners may have, including social justice, only by providing us with an accurate, well-supported account of their subject matter.

literary text, or a social phenomenon. But it should not be controversial that like all academic research, scholarship in these disciplines is in the business of asking questions; that these questions have answers (when they are well-posed); that these answers are not simply evident and can therefore only be arrived at indirectly, by appeal to evidence and argument; and that it is the role of academic disciplines to cultivate methods for collecting the evidence relevant to their questions and for assessing scholarly proposals on the basis of it. It should also be uncontroversial that scholarly standards of this kind can be better or worse. The ancient practice of augury provided an intricate battery of norms for extracting information about the future from the activity of birds (Burkert 1985). These norms were widely accepted and the practice no doubt served a purpose. But they were bogus: the predictions supported by the norms of augury were not in fact warranted or well-supported. In its baldest form, the critique of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences that concerns us holds that the operative norms in these areas are similarly bogus: that what passes for "good scholarship" by the standards of these disciplines is often bad scholarship, or worse, pseudo-scholarship — writing which has the formal trappings of scholarship but which is not aimed at knowledge or understanding but rather at some other outcome.

As noted above, we reject this critique in this bald form. In every area we have considered, there is an abundance of serious scholarship. And yet we do find grounds for concern, not just in individual disciplines, but systematically. As will emerge, the problems concern the quality of the scholarship and the norms and standards governing its production — norms that often serve to suppress scholarship that challenges a rigidly enforced orthodoxy on certain politically charged issues, and which substitute moral and political standards for properly academic standards in the evaluation of scholarship. Before we say more about the real problems as we understand them, however, it will be useful to say a few words to distinguish these real problems from related issues with which they are frequently conflated.

a. *The problem is not that scholars in these areas are significantly more liberal or progressive than the general public.* This is of course true (Gross and Simmons 2014). But this is a general point about the professoriat, not a point specifically about the humanities or the social sciences.[10] More importantly, it is not by itself a problem for scholarship in these areas. Academic mathematicians in the United States are more liberal than the electorate (Chin et al. 2025). But this has no tendency to show that scholarly standards in mathematics are somehow bogus. There may of course be serious problems in the vicinity. The liberal skew in the professoriat may play an indirect role in undermining public support for universities, and also in discouraging full participation in academia on the part of students who find themselves culturally and politically alienated from their professors. But these problems are not problems about the scholarship itself or the standards by which it is assessed and are therefore beyond our remit. More pertinently, when scholarship *is* distorted by politics in the ways we describe below, political homogeneity on the faculty may make this problem harder to spot and therefore harder to correct. This may be an excellent reason for taking an interest in ideological diversity on the faculty (Whittington 2021); but then the core problem is not political homogeneity as such but the fact that political commitments are distorting scholarship in the first place.

b. *The problem is not that many scholars are politically active, or that they see their scholarly work as relevant to their activism.* Scholars are members of the polity who rightly take an interest in social problems. Moreover, insofar as their scholarly competence provides them with

10 Though the skew is more extreme in the humanities and social sciences than in the natural sciences and engineering. See Chin et al. 2025 for a recent study (using political party affiliation as a proxy for ideology).

relevant expertise, it is perfectly acceptable — some would say obligatory (Chomsky 1967) — for scholars to advocate for concrete reforms in light of their expertise. This is clearest when the relevant expertise is technical and the political goal relatively uncontroversial. A sociologist who is an expert on the sociology of crime may legitimately have a view about how best to reduce crime and may legitimately see her research and public-facing scholarship as aimed at realizing such reforms. But it is also true when the relevant expertise is partly normative and the goals controversial. A political philosopher who has concluded on the basis of normative arguments that the race-based preferences in hiring are inherently unfair may legitimately — i.e., compatibly with the highest norms of scholarly rigor and objectivity — see her scholarship as continuous with her activism in opposition to racial preferences. There is some tendency to suppose in these discussions that serious scholarship must always be "value neutral," and hence that a scholar who takes a political position thereby shows "bias" of a sort that undermines her scholarship (following Weber 1917). In our view this is a mistake. Just as there are good questions about how best to reduce the crime rate that empirical sociology can attempt to answer, so there are good questions about what justice requires that political philosophy can begin to answer. A scholar with a reasoned view on this sort of question may be an advocate for a potentially controversial cause; but this sort of activism is compatible with the highest standards of scholarly conduct.

c. *The problem is not that political considerations have broadened the focus of scholarship away from the Western high art canon and other historically central topics toward work by and about members of marginalized groups — women, members of racial and ethnic minorities, and so on.* This is undoubtedly true to a significant degree, but it is not by itself a problem. It is in the nature of the humanities and social sciences that nothing human is alien to them. One enduring lesson of the long post-1960s critique of the canon (and of related phenomena, like the focus on great men and momentous battles in the study of history) is that traditional scholarship ignored or denigrated large swaths of human cultural production. Having realized this, it is only to be expected that responsible scholarship should turn its attention to this neglected material. It is a substantive question how this shift in focus should inform the undergraduate curriculum, where the aim is to introduce students not just to the unjustly neglected aspects of human culture, but also to the most significant aspects of human culture, many of which have not been neglected. But that question about undergraduate pedagogy is not in our remit. It is consistent with this shift in focus that the scholarship on these previously neglected aspects of culture is fully rigorous by any relevant standard, and also a valuable exercise in correcting the errors of the past.

d. *The problem is not that scholarship in these areas is often* critical *or* oppositional, *aiming to debunk or correct the presuppositions of previous scholarship and the wider set of established cultural norms that scholarship reflects.* Much contemporary writing in the humanities and social sciences is predicated on a principle derived from the great "unmaskers" of the 19th century — Marx, Nietzsche and Freud — according to which the prevailing worldview in any time and place inevitably incorporates factual and normative assumptions that persist, not because they are true, but for reasons unconnected to truth, e.g., because they stabilize the social order to the advantage of the powerful. This tradition takes itself to have learnt that what passes for right-thinking common sense about the social order in any given moment is ipso facto suspect: a likely manifestation of ideology in its original sense, and hence a suitable candidate for critique. Needless to say, it is possible to overdo this sort of thing. An intellectual climate in which any sympathetic treatment of Milton's poetry is automatically coded as reactionary on the ground that Milton is a god of the high art canon whose entrenchment can only serve the interests of the ruling class is a climate

that makes it impossible to recognize real value where it exists. But it is not objectionable per se for scholars to approach their work with special sensitivity to the distorting effects of ideology and a healthy dose of skepticism about received ideas. When we read the scholarship of 100 years ago, its blind spots are obvious. It would be surprising if the scholarship of our own time were not similarly distorted in ways that are not obvious to us now; so there is value in maintaining a critical posture that is alert to this possibility.

What is the problem, then? In our view there are several worrying tendencies in contemporary academic scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, all of which reflect, to varying degrees, a distinctive form of politicization in which the scholarly enterprise is taken to be subordinate to, or in the service of, political (social or moral) goals beyond the advancement of knowledge and understanding.

The goals vary from area to area, but in a contemporary context they are generally though not exclusively associated with the progressive left. Put most broadly, the goal might be characterized as turning the humanities into vehicles for *social justice*, or *the elimination of pernicious social hierarchies*. More specific goals under this heading include anti-racism (the eradication of racial hierarchy), feminism (the rejection of patriarchy), the "decolonization" of the academy and of society more generally (undoing the legacy of imperialism), full equity for gender and sexual minorities and, to a much lesser extent, the eradication of class distinctions and the replacement of "neoliberal" capitalism with some form of socialism.

As noted above, it is not a problem that individual scholars have these goals or that they see their work as in the service of them. Many of these goals are laudable, and insofar as the scholarship is not distorted by them, the result is academic work made relevant to social life, and that can hardly be objectionable. (There is no special *virtue* in scholarship which, like poetry, makes nothing happen.) Problems arise when these political goals distort the scholarly enterprise, as they sometimes do.

a. In rare cases, individual scholars and groups of scholars explicitly repudiate the idea that scholarship aims at knowledge and understanding in favor of an overtly and exclusively political conception of the enterprise.

   For example, in a 2021 presidential address to the American Anthropological Association, Akhil Gupta writes that "anthropology is an outlier among the social sciences … because *its political project* is to challenge the culturally dominant commonsense of capitalist consumerism" (Gupta and Stoolman 2022, emphasis added). In a reply published in *American Anthropologist*, Fernando Villanea emphasizes the point that "the value of anthropology is not the pursuit of truth, because all truth is subjective," but rather to "serve the interests" of people who have been harmed by anthropologists in the past (Villanea 2023). Two years later, in the same journal, José Santos argued that "all ethnographies" — the stock in trade of cultural anthropology — have as their goal "not voyeurism but advocacy" (Santos 2025), as if the goal of describing the social world and making sense of it was not only not on the menu, but that it was to be disparaged as a kind of perversion. Taken literally, such remarks call, not for scholarship in the service of a social goal, but for a rejection of the core idea that scholarship aims at understanding.[11]

11 More commonly, such remarks call for combining scholarship in the traditional sense with an activist project and incorporating this mix into the official self-conception of the discipline. When the American Sociological Association announced that its annual meeting would be devoted to "Intersectional Solidarity: Building Communities of Hope, Justice and Joy," the organizers clarified that "the 2024 theme emphasizes sociology as a

b. The most straightforward form of distortion arises when otherwise traditional scholarship is constrained by disciplinary norms to yield results that have been determined in advance to be required by a political or social project. If scholars committed to social justice believe that the cause can only be advanced by finding, for example, that there are no behavioral differences between men and women traceable to biology, they will be under enormous pressure from their own commitments and from their colleagues to find no such differences. Either the research will not be done, or if it is done and the results look bad, the finding will be suppressed or the evidence reinterpreted so as to obscure it.[12] Distortions of this sort can be harmless if they are isolated, since the politically motivated blind spots of one researcher will be exposed by others. When whole disciplines or subdisciplines prejudge substantive questions on political grounds, on the other hand, the upshot can be a serious distortion of the scholarly enterprise.

   This is so not simply because a preordained consensus is likely to be wrong (or at best right for the wrong reasons). The deeper problem is that an artificial consensus of this sort can only be maintained by distorting the scholarly ecosystem in ways that are profoundly damaging. In any discipline structured in this way, research findings will inevitably sometimes conflict with the conclusions that have been sanctioned in advance. The social and historical facts relevant to social justice are complex and hard to know. Given this, genuinely open inquiry will inevitably serve up results that challenge orthodox assumptions. (This is so even if those assumptions are ultimately correct; in any area of academic interest, there is a perennial risk that good faith scholarship will turn up what is later shown to be misleading evidence.) A discipline that has subordinated scholarly rigor to its political project will need mechanisms for suppressing this sort of conflict, and indeed we find many such mechanisms in the disciplines we have studied. Recalcitrant proposals are deemed unpublishable or held to an impossibly high standard.[13] Scholars

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form of liberatory praxis: an effort not only to understand structural inequalities but to intervene in socio-political struggles." (American Sociological Association 2024). This formulation is in principle consistent with treating the effort to understand the social world as governed by scholarly standards that make no reference to the uses to which the research might be put. And yet by incorporating a determinate political goal into the discipline's official self-conception, it risks subordinating the scholarly enterprise to the political project in ways that are potentially distorting.

12 For example, a widely reported 2023 study purported to undermine the broad scholarly consensus that almost all of the hunting in hunter-gatherer societies is done by men (Anderson et al., 2023) — claiming instead that in an extensive database, women hunt in 79% of "foraging" societies. A subsequent reanalysis of Anderson et al.'s data by 15 of the world's leading experts on hunter-gatherers (Venkataraman et al. 2024) showed that the paper involves grave methodological errors, raising serious questions about how it could have been published in the first place. Our internal report on the subject concludes: "The answer is the new epistemology: The paper is believed to undo harms created by gender stereotyping, rooted in male patriarchy. The paper had (1) great positionality (all the authors were female), (2) framed itself in traditional power dynamics (male vs. female) and (3) promoted the preferred ethical position, giving the illusion of fostering gender equality by showing women hunted."

13 Much work in the philosophy of sex and gender is organized around the political project of securing social justice for trans people and other gender minorities, where this project is taken to presuppose the substantive thesis that trans women are women in every sense. While this view is in fact controversial even among feminist philosophers, the field has devoted considerable energy to closing off discussion by blocking the publication of dissenting views. For example, when Holly Lawford-Smith's book *Gender Critical Feminism* was under contract at Oxford University Press, the press was presented with two open letters, one from hundreds of scholars expressing "profound disappointment" with OUP's decision to publish the book, and another from OUP employees and authors urging management to reconsider publication on the ground that the book would harm trans people. (OUP initially informed Lawford-Smith that the press would not publish the book despite a signed contract and positive reports, though the book was eventually published after reconsideration.) Alex Byrne's *Trouble with Gender* (Polity, 2023) was declined by OUP under similar pressure, though later published elsewhere. In at least two cases, edited collections were successfully suppressed when the editors refused to exclude work

who manage to publish results deemed unfavorable to the cause are punished in all of the ways academia makes available: by being stigmatized as reactionary (racist, misogynistic, Islamophobic, transphobic) and hence beyond the pale for invitations to colloquia, conferences and published collections[14], by being ostracized in less dramatic ways, by being held to an impossible standard for tenure and promotion, and so on.

As is obvious, once a structure of this sort is in place, it will often function in the background to stifle dissent on politically charged issues even when no explicit sanctions are threatened or even contemplated. Scholars who want a career in a discipline of this sort will be under enormous pressure to fall into line, to the point where the discipline selects for scholars who are happy to conform their scholarship to these pre-ordained requirements. In the limit, this sort of discipline will produce and sustain an ideological monoculture in which research that might be deemed incompatible with the shared goal of social justice will not appear.[15]

It is important to stress that this sort of distortion does not require a self-conscious conspiracy to suppress the inconvenient truth. A more common mechanism appears to be this: Every discipline has mechanisms for excluding cranks and fools. If *Physical Review Letters* gets a paper with plans for a perpetual motion machine, it will not be read there or at any other serious journal and the author will be "punished" for his heterodox ideas. This is not a lamentable failure of open-mindedness. At any given time in any serious academic discipline, some issues are settled and it can be reasonable for scholars to treat them as such. (This can be reasonable even when the consensus later turns out to be mistaken; the standards for legitimately closing an academic question, like the standards for finding a criminal defendant guilty, are not infallible.) The mechanisms for suppressing scholarly dissent discussed above exploit this feature of academic scholarship. These disciplines in effect treat certain politically charged questions as closed. From the standpoint of a politicized discipline, heterodox claims about sex differences, or the social determinants of crime, or about the relevance of a poet's views on slavery to the assessment of her poetry, are *just bad scholarship*, since they recapitulate well-known mistakes. (See Sokal 2026 for an extensive discussion of the abuses of this gambit.)

As a formal matter, this is not objectionable. Academic disciplines inevitably suppress bad scholarship. The problem is, rather, substantive. Politically charged questions about the social determinants of crime or the division of labor between men and women in hunter-gatherer societies or the significance of a poet's racism for the assessment of her

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by "gender critical" scholars: Richard Marshall's *Women Philosophers* (withdrawn by OUP in 2019) and Petra Buesken's *Heterodox Feminism* (cancelled by Zer0 Books in 2024).

14 See Simpson and Srinivasan (2018) for a philosophical defense of this practice of "no platforming." For a compelling refutation, see Sokal (2026).

15 In 2017 the leading journal in feminist philosophy, *Hypatia,* published an article by a then-untenured scholar arguing that the case for taking a person's gender to be determined by her inner gender identity was equally a case for thinking that a person's race can be determined by her inner racial identity and so for recognizing a genuine phenomenon of "transracialism" (Tuvel 2017). The article precipitated an angry firestorm on Twitter followed by an open letter with 800 signatories calling for an apology on the part of the editorial board, partly on the ground that the article "fails to seek out and sufficiently engage with scholarly work by those who are most vulnerable to the intersection of racial and gender oppressions (women of color) in its discussion of 'transracialism.'" In response, the editorial board, composed of leading figures in the field, offered a "profound apology to our friends and colleagues in feminist philosophy, especially transfeminists, queer feminists and feminists of color, for the harms that the publication of the article on transracialism has caused." Among the handful of papers on the issue published in the past decade, all but one — published in a minor journal — takes the position supported in the open letter.

work *have not in fact been settled*.[16] When they are treated as settled by the scholarly community, the result is an illegitimate suppression of dissent. This is a serious injustice to scholars on the "wrong" side of these issues. It is also in the long run self-defeating for anyone who shares the goal of scholarship in the service of social justice. An artificial consensus on an important issue, sustained by punishing dissent, is unlikely to be a reliable basis for social action, since the consensus will be liable to unravel under pressure from reality. The tendency of some recent work in the humanities and social sciences to close substantive questions prematurely on broadly political grounds is thus incompatible both with the internal aim of scholarship in these areas — to understand the human world — and with whatever instrumental aims one might have for such an understanding, including the aim of promoting social justice as one conceives it.

c. The foregoing presupposes that humanistic scholarship is *distorted* when political considerations are brought to bear in the assessment of scholarship. This in turn presupposes that humanistic inquiry traffics in claims that are true or false independently of their political appeal, and that such claims are to be assessed by reference to the evidence and not by their presumed utility for one or another purpose. There is abundant room for disagreement about the nature of this purported "objectivity," and in particular about whether the objectivity appropriate to the humanistic disciplines differs in some way from the objectivity at issue in the natural sciences (Wright 1992, Daston and Galison 2007). But for present purposes all we need is a minimal distinction between politically attractive accounts on the one hand and true or well-supported accounts on the other. Anyone who accepts this distinction is in a position to recognize the phenomena described in the last section as seriously damaging to the academic enterprise.

   Almost all scholarship in the humanities and social sciences at least implicitly acknowledges this distinction. Even the most politically charged scholarship typically proceeds by giving evidence for the view on offer. It is rare to find a scholar who says explicitly: You should accept my view of (say) the relation between slavery and the American founding, not because the evidence supports it by good scholarly standards, but only because it will promote the cause of (say) racial equity.

   There is, however, a long-standing and deeply rooted current in contemporary humanistic scholarship that regards the idea of scholarly objectivity with profound suspicion. One version of this skepticism is purely epistemological. A scholar of literature or history may concede that there are genuine facts about the meanings of texts or about the past which prevail independently of our representations of them, while at the same time holding that scholarship is aimed, not at an accurate reconstruction of those facts, but rather at an edifying narrative. Any such narrative is constrained to fit the data — the indisputable facts about the text or the historical record. But insofar as it goes beyond

16 In 2023 the American Anthropological Association abruptly canceled a panel discussion on the relevance of biological sex to anthropology, partly on the ground that the discussion would harm the "dignity and safety" of those in attendance, but also on the ground that

> the field of anthropology, and biological anthropology in particular, tends to resist universal arguments in favor of understanding humans in all of their variation. Therefore, the overprescription of the idea of a biological binary for something like sex not only ignores the evidence but goes against the most basic empirical underpinnings of our field. (Letter from Fuentes, Clancy and Nelson, posted at https://americananthro.org/news/letter-of-support-for-aaas-withdrawal-of-session-from-the-annual-meeting/)

this, filling in the gaps, giving explanations, assigning meaning or significance, the aim is not to recover the real past, or the real meanings, but rather to construct a story that serves our purposes. As Hayden White puts the point (approvingly): What historians write are really "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found*." (White 1978, 82) (This is somewhat analogous to a minority view in the philosophy of science, according to which the aim of science is not to discover the real causes of the phenomena, but rather to construct a model serviceable for the prediction and control of nature (van Fraassen 1980).)

This conception of the scholarly enterprise can seem liberating; the scholar is licensed to imagine how things might have been, to explore the manifold ways in which texts *can* be read, without pretending to know what really happened or what was meant. It can also be illuminating; one learns something about a text when one learns that it can fruitfully be read in a certain way. But it is in the nature of this sort of "critical fabulation" (Hartman 2008) to blur the lines between fact and fiction in a way that is potentially distorting.[17]

d. The critique of objectivity described above is limited. The view concedes that there are facts about the human world and about what the evidence supports in which a cautious scholar might take an interest. It simply holds that there is another legitimate task for scholarship that involves freewheeling speculation to fill the gaps.

In this respect it is to be contrasted with a more radical critique, according to which the rhetoric of *truth*, *reason* and *knowledge* is ultimately a sham. This view takes many forms. Some scholars repudiate the notion of truth or accuracy altogether (ostensibly following Nietzsche: "There are no facts, only interpretations"). Others repudiate the allegedly scientistic idea that we can meaningfully speak of the *evidence* for a view, or what that evidence *supports*, independently of our political commitments.

Scholars in this tradition are impressed by the abuses of the rhetoric of objectivity in the past. The authority of science and its objective standards have been wielded to support slavery and white supremacy, the subordination of women, the sterilization of the mentally disabled, the persecution of sexual minorities and the extermination of the Jews. In this tradition, the lesson to be drawn from these abuses (and a vast web of related considerations) is that the rhetoric of objectivity can only be a cover for the operations of power and is therefore to be repudiated by the scholar and opposed wherever it appears.

We say more about this cluster of ideas in the next section. But the important point for now is that on this view, the political considerations we have described as potential distortions of the scholarly enterprise are not distortions at all. A scholar who repudiates the language of truth and evidential support will see the political standards she brings to bear in assessing scholarly proposals as no less legitimate than any other standard for this purpose — and perhaps as more legitimate, since they do not pretend to be something they are not.

To the extent that views of this sort have taken hold, they represent a catastrophe for the humanities and the social sciences understood as academic disciplines. Not only do they

17 This sort of fictionalizing scholarship has two distinguishable rationales. One is to convey a vivid sense of how things might have been by supplying plausible details and imposing narrative form on the material, as in Natalie Davis's *Return of Martin Guerre* (1983). The other is to advance a moral cause by "redressing the violence" that allegedly produced the gaps in the archives in the first place (Hartman 2008, 3). Only in the latter case is this form of scholarship politicized in the sense at issue in this section.

license the substitution of political criteria for properly scholarly criteria in the assessment of academic work. They call into question the rationale for supporting this sort of work in research universities dedicated to the production and dissemination of knowledge.

Although enormous numbers of scholars in the humanistic disciplines profess such views, in practice views of this sort are rarely applied consistently. Scholarship that speaks the language of postmodernism and officially repudiates the rhetoric of truth and objectivity almost always proceeds in practice by giving reasons and marshalling evidence. This is clearest when these views take themselves to be exposing the false claims to objectivity in previous scholarship. A central claim of post-colonial theory is that hegemonic powers have employed the rhetoric of objective history and social science to suppress subaltern voices: a claim which is taken to be supported by abundant evidence, and which is therefore taken to undermine the *false* claims to truth and objectivity in colonialist discourse (Said 1978, Spivak 1988).

But it is also true when positive interpretations and historical construals are advanced, since such proposals are always, in practice, supported by what the author clearly takes to be good reasons. It would therefore be a mistake to see widespread endorsement of the postmodernist critique of objectivity in parts of the humanities as grounds for dismissing scholarship in these areas across the board. Much of this work is valuable scholarship of a familiar sort, perhaps despite its explicit self-conception.

And yet it does constitute a problem. Scholarship in this tradition is often confusing — marshalling reasons while denigrating reason — and often obscure, sometimes as a matter of principle. (The fetish for "clarity" and "rigor" associated with analytic philosophy and the hard sciences is widely taken to be just another rhetorical technique to be eschewed in the name of authenticity.) Perhaps most importantly, insofar as it succeeds in repudiating traditional standards of evidence and argument, the result is a form of discourse in which observations and theoretical pronouncements are connected, not by rational relations of evidential support, but by a kind of free association. The scholarly disciplines that cultivate this sort of work have developed their own standards for assessing it. At its best, writing of this sort is praised for being "dazzling," "destabilizing," "radical," "playful," pointing to "connections" and illuminating "juxtapositions," and also as "empowering" or "liberating" insofar as it provides words that people engaged in the struggle for justice somehow find useful. But of course the same could be said for poetry, which is not a form of scholarship (despite its important place in many universities). Scholarly writing of this sort, even if it can be evaluated by standards of this "non-objective" sort, risks becoming unrecognizable as scholarship by standards at work elsewhere in the university. And that is a potentially serious threat to the humanities and allied fields as academic disciplines.

e. We close this section by noting a problem that is less widespread than it once was, but whose lingering effects can still occasionally be felt. This is the tendency of academic writing in the humanities (and to a lesser extent, the social sciences) to adopt an extensive abstract jargon, often borrowed from philosophy and sometimes even from the sciences, the result of which is prose that has the superficial form of scholarship but which in fact verges on a kind of nonsense. This sort of scholarship was prominent and explicitly valorized beginning in the 1960s with deconstruction and its variants. In this context it was explicitly held that since the ideal of plain and unambiguous assertion is unattainable in principle, scholars should aim to subvert the ideal, writing in a style that is deliberately

obscure, allusive, "open" and "multivalent."

> How will speech and writing function then? They will once more become *gestures*; and the *logical* and discursive intentions which speech ordinarily uses in order to ensure its rational transparency, and in order to purloin its body in the direction of meaning, will be reduced and subordinated. And since this theft of the body by itself is indeed that which leaves the body to be strangely concealed by the very thing that constitutes its diaphanousness, then the deconstitution of diaphanousness lays bare the flesh of the word, lays bare the word's sonority, intonation, intensity — the shout that the articulations of language and logic have not yet entirely frozen, that is, the aspect of oppressed gesture which remains in all speech, the unique and irreplaceable movement which the generalities of concept and repetition have never finished rejecting. (Derrida 1978, 240)

Scholarship in this mold is sometimes deliberately playful, filled with puns and linguistic gimmicks.

> The quantum (dis)continuity queers the very notion of differentiating. It offers a much-needed rethinking of (ac)counting, taking account, and accountability that isn't derivative of some fixed notion of identity or even a fixed interval or origin. (Ac)counting — a taking into account of what materializes and of what is excluded from materializing — cannot be a straightforward calculation, since it cannot be based on the assumed existence of individual entities that can be added to, or subtracted from, or equated with one another. …. Rather, accountability must not be based on anything as such, but rather, must take account of the intra-activity of worlding, of différance, of the non-mathematizable quantum discontinuity which does not exist in space or time but is the very condition of possibility of spacetimemattering, of the cut (cross) cutting itself ad infinitum, the world always already opening itself up, that is, of the entanglements of spacetimematterings (Barad 2011, 149).

More commonly it is simply turgid. There must of course be room for style in academic writing. We would not expect scholars of French poetry or Roman history to write like a computer programmer instructing a machine. But this tendency to what can only be described as deliberate obscurity remains a problem in parts of the humanities. It is impossible to read this sort of prose without concluding that the aim of understanding human culture and society has been replaced by other aims at which the reader can only guess. To the extent that this sort of work persists — and as we say, the tide appears to be ebbing — it represents another ground for concern about scholarship in these areas: a departure from the norms that must govern any serious effort to give a reasoned account of the human world.

4. The Sources of Politicized Scholarship

We have identified three main forms of politicized distortion in recent humanistic scholarship.

a. On the first track, scholarly claims are constrained by the requirement that they cohere with an antecedently accepted political goal, although this is not how the constraint is explicitly described. Rather, unwelcome results or debates are dismissed as having been

rendered moot by "settled science."[18]

b. On the second track, the scholarly goal of understanding the world is displaced by, or supplemented with, the aim of telling stories that serve a pragmatic purpose. On this track, the existence of discourse-independent facts is not denied. Rather, it is claimed that, for epistemological reasons, our scholarly representations can only be *partially* constrained by such facts, the rest of the slack being taken up by the practical purposes that we allegedly have in devising these accounts.

c. On the third track, the idea that there are genuine facts about the world or about what the evidence supports independently of our political commitments is rejected. On this view, good scholarship cannot be *distorted* by political values because it is, at bottom, irredeemably *constituted* by such values.

The first of these routes is not philosophically problematic, in the sense that it makes no questionable claims about the nature of truth, evidence and so forth. However, this style of scholarship is deeply problematic, especially when questions are closed by demonizing opponents to suppress dissent. It is often bad scholarship, since it treats questions as closed that have not in fact been resolved by appropriate scholarly standards; but it is not bad philosophy.

By contrast, both of the other two tracks presuppose some highly problematic ideas in philosophy — ideas that have been widely endorsed by leading philosophers writing in the so-called "continental" tradition[19], and which came to have the force of orthodoxy in many parts of the humanities and the humanistic social sciences.

Underdetermination, Postmodernism and Relativism

To examine these ideas in more detail, we start by distinguishing two kinds of reason one may have for accepting a scholarly proposal. On the one hand, you may have an *epistemic* reason — a reason that bears on the truth or probability of the claim. You have an epistemic reason for believing that smoking causes cancer because the evidence overwhelmingly supports it; the hypothesis is overwhelmingly probable given the evidence. On the other hand, you may have *non-epistemic*, pragmatic reasons for rejecting the idea. Maybe you're the scion of a big tobacco fortune and risk a financial hit and mental anguish if you open your mind to the risks of smoking, despite the evidence. (In this case the reason is prudential, but moral and political reasons for holding a belief also count as "pragmatic" or "non-epistemic.")

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18 In a related form of distortion, scholarly claims and lines of inquiry are suppressed on the ground that allowing them would cause harm to vulnerable people. We have not discussed this problem separately only because proponents of this gambit never say: "Scholars should not discuss the topic because discussion might be harmful — and yet the questions are genuinely open, and our opponents may be right." Rather they say, or imply, that we should not discuss the question *first* because we already know the answer, and *second* because reopening the settled question might cause harm. For example, in a discussion arguing that it is not "permissible" to reopen certain questions in the philosophy of gender, Mark Lance writes: "To produce arguments, in this context—that trans women are not women, or trans lesbians are not lesbians—is not just a view we can easily reject as confused [i.e., as bad scholarship] and offensive. It is complicity with systemic violence and active encouragement of oppression" (Lance 2019).

19 We occasionally distinguish the so-called "analytic" tradition in philosophy from the so-called "continental" tradition, though it is universally acknowledged both that the distinction is not sharp and that the terminology is unfortunate. (Many of the great analytic philosophers wrote in German.) There is no generally accepted account of the contrast, but it is clearly real enough in practice. See Thomson 2019 for discussion. We should also emphasize that while the most influential critique of objectivity derives from the continental tradition, similar ideas have been endorsed by prominent figures in the analytic tradition, e.g., Rorty 1979 and Putnam 1981.

The philosophical idea underlying the second track is that our epistemic reasons are never enough by themselves to justify any particular claim about the world — perhaps most especially about the human world. If we are to have a good overall reason for accepting some particular proposal, it can only be because in addition to whatever epistemic reason we may have, there is some other kind of reason for believing it — an instrumental one, perhaps (it furthers one of our projects), or a moral one (it would be good if everyone believed it). On this view, whenever anyone recommends believing a scholarly claim — for example, the claim that vaccines are safe and effective against certain diseases — this cannot be justified simply by the evidence; it must also be seen as resting on moral or pragmatic reasons of some sort. Call this the (Epistemic) Underdetermination thesis.

On the underdetermination view, the distinction between epistemic reasons and non-epistemic reasons is not denied; what's claimed, rather, is that the epistemic will always need help from the non-epistemic. According to the *postmodernist* ideas that underlie the third track to politicization, it is a mistake to recognize such a distinction in the first place. On this view, there can be no such thing as "following the evidence wherever it may lead," regardless of whether it coheres with one's non-epistemic values.[20] If some line of argument is taken to support an interesting conclusion, that can only be because accepting the conclusion on the basis of those considerations realizes a non-epistemic value of some sort.[21] To this, postmodernist views also tend to add, for good measure, that there is no such thing as an objective "fact": a thing that simply obtains, regardless of whether anyone knows about it. Rather, our knowledge of the facts *and the facts themselves* are one and all socially constructed, built to serve some contingent non-epistemic purpose.

Philosophically, postmodernism is far more radical and far more problematic than underdetermination. And yet it is postmodernist ideas that came to have the widest influence. Starting in the 1960s, and initially largely as a result of the work of French thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernist views of knowledge and truth came to have the status of unquestionable orthodoxy in vast swaths of the humanities and the humanistic social sciences. As these ideas came under increasingly harsh criticism from philosophers and other critics, explicit theoretical discussions of these isms began to wane, though not their enduring influence on scholars' conceptions of inquiry (as we will see below).

Although there are significant conceptual differences between postmodernism and underdetermination, the two views have a strongly similar upshot, which is the prime source of their appeal: Both imply that the justification for a claim to knowledge always rests irremediably on some contingent non-epistemic value, or on the interests of people who occupy a distinctive social position. In other words, both views have a strongly *relativist* upshot: A belief will count as knowledge only relative to some contingent set of non-epistemic values. Change those values and you may well end up changing whether something is known, or whether something is a fact. Point to variation in those values and you may wind up persuading yourself that nothing is known objectively, but that conflicting local "knowledges" may all be equally legitimate.

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20 We say "non-epistemic" values here because even the most hard-headed anti-relativists often concede that the acceptability of a hypothesis on a given body of evidence may turn on the relative value researchers assign to *arriving at the truth* vs. *avoiding error* (Foley 1987).

21 A related view holds that the evidence supports a given conclusion only relative to a contingent, historically and culturally variable *epistemic system*: a set of unspoken standards that determines what counts as evidence in a given community. Foucault (1970) calls these things *epistemes*; Kuhn (1970) calls them *paradigms*. This view is distinguishable in principle from the view that social and political values inform the epistemic norms, as Kuhn's discussion of the Copernican revolution shows. For present purposes, however, these views may be regarded as of a piece.

The Widespread Influence of Relativism about Knowledge

It is rare for a heady philosophical idea to gain such widespread acceptance within the academy; but relativism[22] of this rough sort is the exception, as we can see from the enormous variety of scholars, representing many different areas of inquiry, who subscribe to it. Here, for example, is prominent feminist philosopher Kathleen Lennon writing in a top journal:

> Feminist epistemologists, in common with many other strands of contemporary epistemology, no longer regard knowledge as a neutral transparent reflection of an independently existing reality, with truth and falsity established by transcendent procedures of rational assessment. Rather, most accept that all knowledge is situated knowledge, reflecting the position of the knowledge producer at a certain historical moment in a given material and cultural context. (Lennon 1997, 37)

Similarly, highly influential sociologists of knowledge Barry Barnes and David Bloor write:

> For the relativist there is no sense attached to the idea that some standards or beliefs are really rational as distinct from merely locally accepted as such. Because he thinks that there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality he does not see rationally and irrationally held beliefs as making up two distinct and qualitatively different classes of thing. (Barnes and Bloor 1982, 21)

Anthropologist Charles R. Hale says this in his editor's introduction to *Engaging Contradictions: Theory, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship* (2008):

> The primary purpose of this volume is to provide a broad and grounded counterpoint to the standard admonition to students entering social science and humanities graduate training programs: "Welcome, come in, and please leave your politics at the door." …More substantively, poststructuralist theorists of varying affinities have delivered the basic critique forcefully and persistently over the past three decades: all knowledge claims are produced in a political context; notions of objectivity that ignore or deny these facilitating conditions take on a de facto political positioning of their own, made more blatant and unavoidable by the very disavowal.

Writing in the leading journal in his field, anthropologist C. A. Loperena goes so far as to accuse those who believe in objective truth and evidence of being apologists for the political status quo.

> For my purposes, feminist scholars have provided the most insightful reformulations of social science research methods, which not only critique the purported neutrality of white male researchers, but also draw attention to the "situatedness" of seeing…Thus, our perception of the world — our gaze — is itself circumscribed by our positionality within particular social, political, and cultural networks and necessitates an ethical stance on the topics we choose to investigate. This critical positioning rejects the myth of objectivity in

22 We will continue to use "relativism" for the ideas sketched above: that there is no such thing as objective knowledge or an objective fact, and that reasons to support a view always depend on contingent non-epistemic values and interests. That said, we should note that the word has other meanings. "Relativism" sometimes stands for the indisputable descriptive claim that human societies accept a wide variety of norms (including norms for regulating belief). It sometimes stands for the moral view that these divergent norms are to be tolerated, in the sense that it is wrong for one group to impose its norms on others that do not share them. Finally, it is sometimes used for the view that the binding norms are more permissive than we might suppose, allowing a wide range of social practices for responding to the evidence. These versions of relativism are all compatible with the idea that it always makes good sense to ask whether any given claim is well-supported by the evidence without specifying a further purpose to which the claim is to be put, and so do not count as "relativism" in our stipulated sense.

> science, what Haraway described as "the power to see while not being seen" (Haraway 1988:581) and also ensures that we are answerable for what we "see" and produce.
>
> Ultimately, how we align ourselves contributes substantially to our scholarship. … Through a critical interrogation of our subjective understandings of the social and cultural fields we inhabit, we can attempt to produce a different type of research praxis—one that is founded on mutual recognition and direct political engagement. Researchers who uphold the conventional understanding of objectivity and who believe that they do not have influence over the settings in which they work "are already committing themselves to a very clear moral and political position—that of letting things remain as they are, of leaving the status quo untouched" (Vargas 2006, 18). (Loperena 2016, 340)

Animal studies scholars Lara Drew and Nik Taylor write:

> … Ideas and new theories can inform action and in turn action can lead to the development of new ideas and theories. However, to achieve this, the academy has to accept, at least in principle, that all research is ideological and that claims to neutrality in research are nonsensical. As the sociologists of science remind us, all knowledge is a product of the outcome of social relations and contexts (e.g., Kuhn, 1996; Latour & Woolgar, 1979). Lather (1992) points out that research consisting of overtly based values and convictions that are openly opposed to the status quo is neither more nor less ideological than mainstream research. Instead, claiming positions of neutrality and objectivity mystifies the intrinsic ideological nature of research that further legitimizes the status quo (Lather, 1986), reproducing social inequality. Nothing can ever be totally impersonal, or totally independent, of the writer and it remains impossible for researchers to not influence (intentionally or unintentionally) their own research. Likewise, poststructuralism acknowledges that all points of view are inherently politically biased and inherently rejects objectivity (Peters & Burbules, 2004). Despite the growing acknowledgement that all research is positioned, the positivistic paradigm underpinning mainstream academia leads many within to still lay claim to neutrality and be intent on keeping ethical convictions to a minimum due to a belief that they taint the research process (see, e.g., Aronowitz & Ausch, 2000). (Drew and Taylor 2014, 160)

Psychologist Leoandra Onnie Rogers draws attention to the way in which the notion of "objective science" has been abused and takes this to show that science is inevitably "ideological":

> The call for psychological science to make amends for "causing harm to communities of color and contributing to systemic inequities" (American Psychological Association [APA], 2022a) requires a critical acknowledgment that science itself is not neutral but a sociopolitical and ideological endeavor (Jovanović, 2010; Roberts & Mortenson, 2022; Rutherford, 2020; Settles et al., 2020; Winston, 2020). From its inception, psychologists used science to produce what was framed as incontrovertible "hard" evidence of racial hierarchy and infallible "proof" that white people (i.e., cismale, heteronormative, and economically resourced white people) were superior to Indigenous and Black people (e.g., APA, 2022a; Winston, 2020). By asserting that the scientific method could ascertain objective truths that are neutral—and explicitly not ideological —while using this method to sanctify the ideology of white supremacy, racism was woven into the very fabric of how we do psychological science (e.g., Guthrie, 1976; Winston, 2020). (Rogers 2024, 484–85)

Critical race theorist Khiara Bridges endorses a radical perspectivalism about truth:

> CRT, like its Critical Legal Studies predecessor, has been heavily influenced by postmodernist and poststructuralist philosophy and literary criticism — which has been

> identified with thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan. One of the many ideas that postmodernism introduced was the possibility that there is no such thing as objective truth. Postmodernism proposes that truth is not a unitary thing that is "out there" and is entirely independent of context. Instead, it proposes that truth is contingent; it depends on the frameworks and the systems of knowledge that society has created to ascertain what "truth" is. According to postmodernism, the truth is that there are many truths, all of which are dependent on the perspective that the truth seeker brings to the quest to know it. Truth, then, is profoundly subjective. (Bridges 2019, 66).

Given how widespread such views have become, it was only a matter of time before they made it into the high school curriculum. Here is an excerpt from a text about social justice meant for high school students:

> One of the key contributions of critical theorists concerns the production of knowledge. Given that the transmission of knowledge is an integral activity in schools, critical scholars in the field of education have been especially concerned with how knowledge is produced. These scholars argue that a key element of social injustice involves the claim that particular knowledge is objective, neutral, and universal. An approach based on critical theory calls into question the idea that objectivity is desirable or even possible. The term used to describe this way of thinking about knowledge is that knowledge is socially constructed.
>
> When we refer to knowledge as socially constructed we mean that knowledge is reflective of the values and interests of those who produce it. This concept captures the understanding that all knowledge and all means of knowing are connected to a social context. (Sensoy and DiAngelo 2017, 29)

The Appeal of Relativism

How did so many scholars, from so many different fields, become so thoroughly convinced of a heady view in epistemology, especially one that is stubbornly rejected by the mainstream of professional philosophers (Boghossian 2006, Nagel 1997)?

We cannot say that the appeal is intellectual: We cannot point to powerful arguments that make a strong case for the view. On the contrary, and as we will see in a moment, the intellectual case against relativism about knowledge is overwhelming. However, while it is not easy to see a strong intellectual case for relativism about knowledge, it is easy to see how it came to seem appealing to scholars who think of their scholarly project as a form of politics.

In what way is the view politically appealing? If any claim to knowledge — even one coming from established science or direct observation — depends for its justification on certain contingent non-epistemic values, then any such claim can be dispatched if one rejects the non-epistemic values on which it allegedly depends. And that can seem to be a very powerful tool.

Suppose you don't like what biology is saying about a politically charged topic, e.g., sex. You don't have to accept what biology has to say, no matter how "well-supported by the evidence" it happens to be, since its justification will also depend ineliminably on certain non-epistemic values, ones that you may happen not to share. You don't like a thesis that evolutionary psychology is building a case for? You may ignore the whole field, dismissing it as deriving from misguided political values. And so on.

In general, a social constructionism about knowledge provides a blanket *a priori* guarantee that no one can force you to accept a thesis you don't like on the alleged grounds that it has been

shown to be true by the available evidence. For according to the view in question, there is simply no such thing.

There is another dimension to the political appeal of postmodernism, and that is its role in the post-colonial era in which it originated and flourished. Many colonial projects were justified by the claim that the colonizers were giving those they colonized the benefit of their superior knowledge and culture. For intellectuals who had turned decisively against colonialism, it was appealing to be able to resist the colonizers, not by detailed critique of their spurious claims to superiority, but rather by maintaining on general philosophical grounds that there is no such thing as superior knowledge, only different knowledges, each appropriate to its own setting, just as postmodernist relativism asserts.

The Problems with Relativism

While the political appeal of such relativistic views is well-understood, so, too, are their theoretical problems. For it is in fact extremely hard to make sense of the idea that there can be no such thing as a purely epistemic reason for believing something. The idea that there must be such reasons seems to lie at the root of any viable conception of knowledge and inquiry. We can see this in a variety of ways.

Consider first that the relativism is rarely applied consistently by the relativists themselves. If someone really believed that all knowledge claims depend on contingent background non-epistemic values, they would have to admit that while they believe that climate change is real, given their progressive values, the MAGA folks might be entitled to believe that climate change is a hoax, given their conservative values. Similarly, for claims about how many sexes there are, or whether race is real, and so on.

No one takes this tolerant attitude towards such disagreements, least of all the scholars who officially espouse the relativistic views. But with what right do they dismiss these opposing claims, if it really is true that every claim to knowledge depends on a variable non-epistemic context? On a relativistic view of justification, the only way in which such an intolerance could be justified is if there were something privileging one set of background values over the others. But it would be odd to be an objectivist about the non-epistemic values that inform the social construction of knowledge (privileging some over others) while being an anti-objectivist about the natural facts studied by biology and physics.[23]

Moreover, even if proponents of such relativistic views could find it in themselves to be tolerant of these substantive disagreements, they could still not be fully consistent relativists, for a familiar reason: The relativist would have to admit at least one exception to the relativistic thesis about knowledge, and that would be the thesis of relativism itself. The relativist does not

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23 For an exemplary expression of this odd combination of views, see Fernando Villanea writing in *American Anthropologist*:

> The core academic value of anthropology is not the pursuit of truth, because **all truth is subjective**. Conversely, there are millions of people who are adversely affected by the subjective version of truth we choose to tell. **That is the objective reality**, and so *our* core value should instead be to serve *their* interests (Villanea 2023, 184; italics in original; boldface added).

Taken at face value, this is incoherent. Taken more charitably, it is the still bizarre claim that while there are no objective truths *about the subtle descriptive matters with which anthropology is concerned*, there are objective truths about values and morals — about who is *adversely* affected by a given position, and about what anthropologists *should* take as their core values.

say — and could not mean: Relativism about knowledge is true because it coheres with my background non-epistemic values. Once again, this would entail that someone who did not share those values would be free to repudiate the relativism and accept an objectivist conception of knowledge instead. And this would be something that the relativist herself would have to acknowledge because it's entailed by her own view. But no relativist does — and arguably no relativist could — have such an attitude toward the view itself. In the excerpts cited above, it is said over and again that it has been shown by the finest philosophical thinking of our time that knowledge is always produced in a social context and inevitably reflects the values of those who produce it. This is not put forward simply as the claim that *according to progressive values*, all knowledge is socially constructed, but this need not be accepted by those who don't share those values. It's very clear that what's being said is: Every person who is up on the most important developments in epistemology would know that all knowledge is socially constructed. Anyone, no matter what their background values, has reason to believe this.

The view that we can never have a purely epistemic reason for believing something to be true is thus an inherently unstable view. It may not be strictly self-contradictory; but it is pragmatically self-refuting: Even someone advocating it would not be able coherently to endorse it in full generality.[24] And that is bad enough.

But if we can't avail ourselves of a relativistic view of knowledge, how will we debunk the rationale given for colonialism? The answer is that relativism about knowledge is not only not needed for a trenchant critique of colonialism; it threatens to undermine any such critique. It's not needed because it is enough to point out first, that much allegedly superior knowledge is in fact junk science by scientific standards, and second, that even when the allegedly superior knowledge is genuine, nothing can justify subjugating, humiliating, oppressing or exploiting people in order to promote it. Relativism threatens to undermine this direct critique of colonialism for reasons that we have already seen: If the views of oppressed people are protected from criticism by the powerful because all knowledge is relative to background values, then the powerful may be protected from criticism by the oppressed for the very same reason.

The First Route

This concludes our discussion of the problems underlying the second and third routes toward politicizing scholarship. What about the first route?

Recall that on this way of proceeding, no radical ideas in epistemology are invoked. Rather, unwelcome results are suppressed for not cohering with desired political outcomes and the substantive conclusions that have come to be seen as required for the achievement of those outcomes. As we have stressed, it is rare for this to be admitted explicitly. Rather, what happens in practice is that unwelcome results are dismissed on the grounds that it is "settled science" that no such result could be true. Often, though, that claim about what's been settled by science is totally exaggerated.[25]

Is there any possible justification for this approach to scholarship? It's possible that scholars who find it acceptable to behave in this way are tacitly reasoning along the following lines: Yes,

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24 As Plato shows at *Theaetetus,* 171a-c.

25 One clear example of this phenomenon is the treatment of biological sex in many areas of the humanities and social sciences. Throughout these areas it is widely held that biological sex in humans is not a "binary" but rather a continuum, divisions in which are ultimately arbitrary, *and that settled science has established this so securely that any attempt to treat biological sex as an independent (binary) variable reveals a dubious political agenda on the part of the researcher.*

there is value in believing the truth, and value in following the evidence wherever it may lead, but it is possible for those values to be *overridden* by other values, such as the value of not harming certain people, especially if the people in question have already suffered a great deal at the hands of people claiming to know better.

This line of thought raises interesting issues about whether it makes sense to *compare* epistemic reasons for accepting a scholarly proposal with other kinds of reason, for example, moral ones. While we find it relatively easy to compare, say, moral reasons with prudential ones, and to assess which one dominates in any given case, it's much harder to make sense of comparing epistemic reasons with moral or prudential ones. How much money would someone have to offer you to get you to disbelieve that, at this very moment, you are sitting in front of a text reading these words — or better: to make it rational for you to disbelieve this? The question seems absurd. We can certainly make sense of our having moral or prudential reasons for not *saying* something out loud that we know to be true, on the grounds that it might hurt another person. But that would be a clash between two moral norms on action ("speak the truth" vs. "do no harm"), not a clash between an epistemic reason for *believing something* and a moral reason for disbelieving it.[26]

However, even if we decided that we can make sense of such a comparison and can arrive at a rational decision about which type of reason should prevail, it's arguable that of all the people in the world who should not be engaging in such deliberations it is scholars at universities. For isn't it our constitutive duty, as scholars, to seek a true understanding of the world — whatever that may turn out to be?[27] Of course, postmodernism tried to deny that there could be any such coherent aim; but we are now considering a route to a politicized scholarship that does not rely on postmodernist ideas. And once we have conceded that there are truths to be known in an area of scholarship, there is no room for the further thought that scholarship may legitimately suppress or distort those truths even for the sake of advancing what may be a legitimate moral or social goal.[28]

5. Disinterested Inquiry and the Soul of the University

We have identified several forms of politicization in recent humanistic scholarship that threaten to distort the enterprise, having taken care to distinguish these problematic forms of politicization from scholarship that takes a stand on politically charged issues but which employs fully defensible standards.

Let us, in conclusion, step back and consider the larger stakes of the afflictions in the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

Part of the *raison d'être* of a university is that it should engage in disinterested inquiry —

26 For an influential defense of the idea that moral values may bear on the rationality of belief (and not just outward assertion), see Basu and Schroeder 2019.

27 As is familiar, we must distinguish normative questions about *which problems to pursue* from normative questions about which view to accept on the basis of the evidence at any given stage in inquiry. A microbiologist is under no duty to pursue questions about how to engineer novel pathogens. But insofar as she is a scientist, she *is* under a duty to respond to the evidence in arriving at her conclusions, even if it would be wrong, all things considered, for her to promulgate those conclusions. (Needless to say, questions of this sort in the ethics of research rarely arise in the humanistic disciplines.)

28 Like all principles of this sort, this one is not absolute. A physicist may suppress nuclear secrets — and in a rare emergency, perhaps even distort them — when lives are at stake. This report is premised on the substantive judgment that when it comes to research in the humanities and social sciences, this justification for suppressing or distorting research findings is rarely operative.

inquiry aimed at knowledge and understanding, both for their own sake and for the sake of further goods that require genuine knowledge and understanding, rather than ideologically informed opinion, for their promotion. This, at least in part, is what universities are *for*. Indeed, it might well be thought that one of the greatest contributions a university can make to society is to provide a model of what disinterested inquiry can be and how it might thereby be of value. If the pursuit of disinterested inquiry is compromised, it strikes at the very foundation on which a university should be based, just as the corrupt administration of justice strikes at the foundation upon which a system of justice should be based.

As we have already noted, there are those in academia who would question the value of disinterested inquiry, or even its possibility. But as we have argued, these doubts are the product of philosophical confusion; there is in fact no good reason to question either the coherence or the value of disinterested inquiry, however difficult it may be.

It is largely for these reasons that we regard the failings we have pointed out as so serious. They are not mere problems in the administration or operation of a university, but they strike at the very heart and soul of what a university should be for.

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