

ACADEMIC CORRUPTION

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IS ACADEMIA CORRUPTING?

Any outsider who encounters members of academia, generally teachers, professors or other, confronts certain types of behavior that hinder communication. That is because almost by nature, academia defines itself primarily as an institution of knowledge, clearly distinguishing the initiated persons from the vulgar. This system produces a principle of hierarchy and exclusion, where status, competition and quest for recognition are primary. A feature that becomes more intense and visible with the level of education and teaching. In this text, we will examine different aspects of this phenomenon, which is rarely exposed in a clear fashion, as if academia was a sort of sacred place. Even though we can recognize the utility and necessity of such an institution, we should be able to identify and name the perverse or pathological aspects of its functioning, the same way it is commonly done with the business world for example. Formalism, arrogance, ignorance of the self and dogmatism will constitute some of the numerous hallmarks that we will discuss.

This text is written with a particular consideration for the work in philosophy, although a number of described features fit just as well for other fields. Of course, general tendencies are hereby described, to which here and there some persons or circumstances might escape. As

well, the idea of the present text is not to radically deny the usefulness of academia, but only to focus on the pathological dimension of the scholarly institution.

Greed

Greed is an important component of academic life. First of all, greed for knowledge, with an unavowed desire to know everything, and the fear of missing out on something: any lack or mistake can be a cause of reproach or shame. The encyclopedic temptation is strong, both as a form of control and as a basis for showing off. This desire is never ending and never fully satisfied, the pleasure of discovering is always embedded in a matrix of anxiety, the contemplation of ideas can never in itself fulfill the mind. The quest is very much result oriented. Incomprehension or ignorance is taboo: there is no room for it, it should never be expressed. In a less obsessive way, this greed is manifested in the dilettante or mundane attitude, where one gathers information here and there, without any substantial unity of research, elements of erudition which of course can be displayed at will, in a glittering fashion. The desire to impress the audience hinders and eclipses

any real teaching, any invitation to think. In all cases the principle of the lecture, as a continuous monologue, imposes itself on the audience: the “knower” captures and saturates the space, leaving no interstice, or hardly any, to his audience. Greed as well operates in the quest for fame, recognition, power, status or wealth, in a more or less hidden way, that will even be readily denied when mentioned. The obsession for the diploma or certification rather than learning captures very well this greed.

Rigidity

In academic life, one must comply with the norms. There are standards and regulations about how to write, the structure of articles, the form of theses, etc. You have to write bibliography in a specific order, you have to teach in a certain way. You have to design a curriculum according to the rules. Pedagogical freedom is rather fictitious and limited. This has a corrupting effect, since one starts to live according to a regulation, a preestablished idea, instead of reason or intuition. Thinking becomes solidified, which is against the nature of a subject that is changing and plastic. One then

fears to do something different, because he would become an outcast. Pedagogical trends of the moment, rules or established curriculum become a must, defining the formal content of any given teaching.

Ritualism

There is a repetitive dimension in academia. A routine that kills passion and spirit. Since things have to be done in a certain way, form easily prevails over content: some work or idea interesting in content might not be accepted because it doesn't correspond to the right form. Creativity involved is minimal. It is as well bureaucratic and heavy; a lot of efforts might be spent in vain in order to promote a creative innovation. And numerous teachers infinitely repeat the same speech, year after year.

Safety

A position in an academic structure creates stability and a sense of belonging. Inertia sets in. There is an established way of proceeding for a career in academia, so it doesn't require inventing something new. All you need to do is pass certain exams and meet the criteria

in force. Competition is not as high and unstable as in the business world for example, one can settle in one position as a teacher or researcher and stays there for years, or hopes to do so. Tenure remains the ideal for professorship. In this sense any given institution gains a sacred aura, since it guaranties this safety, becoming like a sect or a freemasonry, where belonging puts one on the “right” side, with the reassurance of being an “insider.”

Bad faith

There is a lack of parrhesia - courage to tell the truth - in this profession. There are different political games to follow in order to be able to stay inside the structure or institution and progress professionally. Therefore even if one senses a problem, ideological or moral, he will be prone to hide it or lie about it, even to oneself, in order to remain peacefully within the system. For example, criticism of colleagues is not allowed in an open way, for it will not be well taken: it is done in harsh way on the side. In open debates, eristics easily take the upper hand on dialectics, any divergence of opinions becomes a fight, an attitude than tends to

forbid any open disagreement and real dialogue. And as a corporation, any criticism from the outside provokes instinctively a collective outcry, without taking the time to consider the legitimacy of those criticisms.

Negation of subject

The subject is not valued in academia, or merely in an artificial way, through an attribution of knowledge and status. Therefore the subjective dimension of the behavior and work is overall forgotten or denied. The subject does not really exist, except in his practical expectations. It is buried in knowledge and formalities, be it for the professor or the student. Addressing directly the person is therefore almost taboo, it is easily taken as an ad hominem and unfair attack. One should pretend there is no one behind any academic work, the author is “absent”, except in some very private discussions where resentment can be freely expressed. For example, to be a “professor”, like any official title or function with its aura and ritualistic array in a way, negates the existence of a real subject.

Authority cult

When writing or saying something, it is more prestigious to refer to an authority, preferably old or recent, depending on the field and the nature of the work. There is implicitly a permanent tendency to devalue comparatively one's own ideas, which must be justified in relation to others. Thinking becomes in a sense forbidden or minimized: what an authority or recognized expert declares is by definition more interesting, substantial or objective than what the subject personally thinks. Any daring or innovative perspective is therefore excluded, the external authority prevails over the inner authority, the autonomy of the subject. Footnotes and references become more important than the written text itself. This cult of authority tends to generate a "good student" behavior, where one has to reproduce the "right answers", mimic the "right way", show his admiration, please people in power, and not dare think by himself or take initiative. Later on, the "good student", after years of obedience, will acquire the freedom and power to impose the same scheme on his own subordinates.

Status

The status or position one occupies tends to play a central role. It distorts how one sees the world, which produces a type of perversion of reality or a replacement of it by that particular status. Thus, an abstract or conventional construction, such as an academic structure or an honorific title starts to live on its own and dominate a subject's life, his relation to thinking and to other persons, as a sort of simulacrum of reality.

Certitude

Precision and exactness are required, since they provide a feeling of certitude. One has to give an exact quote, be sure about a source of knowledge, run experiments and correlations in order to confirm an idea. This makes one not dare make original conceptual connections but rather rely on something definite and safe. Indetermination or incertitude becomes a source of anxiety, constituting a sufficient reason to refuse an idea.

Alienation from life

Dealing with existential issues is usually not a welcome preoccupation. Dissertations and reports are mainly written to be buried in libraries, rather than to be useful or even to be read and discussed with others. There is a tendency towards a descriptive mode, theoretical, instead of a performative way of interacting with the world, especially in certain fields such as philosophy. There is a lack of passion and therefore a certain spiritual inertia, a radical separation between theoretical work and existential issues. The scheme of the classroom, the forms and academic stakes, tend to invade and redefine reality. We produce and learn ideas without evaluating their conflicting dimension with the world and common sense.

Formalism

Is imposed a dictatorship of the form, which one has to abide by, which implies a lack of problematization or criticism, an absence of creative freedom. Working, writing and editing have to be realized in a certain way, otherwise they will be refused or scorned upon. Transgressing the rules will provoke ostracism, and expul-

sion from the “official” circle. It is therefore not a plastic structure, so it hardly corresponding to the needs of thinking and life. There is as well a clear-cut division between academia and non-academia. You can rarely belong to both camps: you are either with academia or you are outside of it, since the rules of the game and the codes of the institution are very specific. Of course, those who grew up in the milieu and learned early on how to master the codes are quite privileged. The academic system imposes codes of its own that must be used when speaking to each other. Not only must the professor be addressed by mentioning his academic title before his name, but one is also expected to mention some established disposition towards him as well. One must use words such as “Dear,” “Distinguished” or “Esteemed.” This habit of feigned appreciation provokes an estrangement from the very idea of authentically appreciating a peer and other people as well. The world in which all people are “dear” to you is a world in which it becomes increasingly hard to separate the fictitious and reality.

Recognition

There are strong hierarchical and competitive relations within the system. Race for permanent academic positions, tenures, publishing in recognized editing bodies. Comparison becomes more important than any other criterion. The recognition of a paper and the amount of citations on it are what matters more than the content itself. Reputation makes or breaks individuals, which accounts for the “publish or perish” system. This need for personal recognition encourages a competitive attitude, which explains why academics do not share ideas and propose collaborations: they need to be the first to publish a new idea, they want to be the one who will speak at conferences, they want to be the official author and dread that any one might steal their idea.

Seriousness

There is a strong bearing of the “spirit of seriousness” , where playing and innovative endeavors are frowned upon. The conscientious and zealous moral obligation easily engenders an austere and cold atmosphere. Creativity and beauty are not crucial param-

eters for the work. Under the pretext of scientificity, any boldness of initiative, playfulness, humor or creativity is rather prohibited. Any serious work has to present itself as heavy and stuffy. And each individual is engrossed in his own schemes and ideas, convinced that they alone represent truth and objectivity.

Rejection of the concrete

There is a ubiquitous preference for abstract speech in academia, and a rejection of the concrete, the narration, the singular, the personal. Daily events, stories or legends, specific examples are considered of a lower level, while this is what constitutes and preoccupies a human being on a daily basis, what embodies theory. The human lives and thinks a lot through narration, abstraction remaining an extra step, something that is built above particular situations, outside of it, on a meta level. Therefore, an important dimension of human thinking is omitted and even denied. For this reason, the utility and necessity of examples is often overlooked, when it would give substance and meaning to the theory. Ideas have primacy over any other form of reality, abstractions are overinvested, and this

primacy of abstraction tends to deny the reality and importance of the singular.

Monologism

Academia operates mainly through the principle of monologues. Dialogues are a great rarity, while dialoguing is constitutive of thinking. Exchanges are either purely formal and polite, or merely transmissive, to teach or to show what one knows. Between peers, it can be called an exchange of monologues, which often turns into a dispute between persons or schools of thought, periodically quite acerbic. Monologues make thought more linear and rigid, repeating itself, turning in circles. Dialogue is well what permits dialectics, nourishing itself from “otherness” , while monologue is monolithic, monotonous, considering itself self-sufficient. The use of personal, abstract or scholarly language, overwhelming the interlocutor, contributes to this lack of dialogue.

Complication

One has to phrase things, orally or by writing in a way that remains incomprehensible to most people:

the “deeper” and more complicated the better. The content shouldn’t be accessible to the common public, otherwise it is not sufficiently “intelligent” and erudite. The speech easily gets caught up in its own conceptual quagmire, to the extent of becoming incomprehensible or uninteresting for the audience. The challenge of transparency and communicability is ignored, preference is given to a “bright” , detailed and exhaustive description. Even when the task is to explain to a larger public, preference is often not given to a clear and simple form, since the discourse has to conserve its style of expertise, loaded with scholarly presuppositions.

Erudition

Erudition is more important than both thinking and the self. One has to learn what has been discovered and written, and refer to it. One has to show he has memorized information and procedures, by mentioning references and quotations, rather than reflect personally and engage in a thinking process. The value of a thinking activity is reduced, thought is considered secondary and not worked through and developed. In

this sense, results count more than process, ideas are more important than their genesis, erudition is more significant than intellectual adventure.

Castration

Due to the constant demand of corresponding to specific norms, to know a lot and to impress others through this display of knowledge, is developed a sense of personal impotence. One is never “good” enough, as one necessarily ignores lots of things, which induces worry of mistake and other’s judgment. One then does not dare write his own ideas without quoting someone, one’s own personal thought is reduced to insignificance. Fear of criticism is strong. There is a common “imposter syndrome”, a strong mistrust towards oneself is developed: one does not dare to be authentic and trusting, engendering a mutilation of thought and existence. Academic castration takes as well the form of envy: academics will be envious of their non-academic friends for their natural pragmatism. The academic’s envy will be directed for example at the non-academic person’s bigger salary, or their general savviness in worldly matters.

Resentment

There is both resentment towards oneself and towards others. Towards oneself for not achieving enough, being short on one's own ambitions, and towards others for being better than us, or more famous and respected. This atmosphere of competition and unsatisfaction develops anger and bitterness, envy is in this context a common phenomenon.

Arrogance

An academic in general considers himself better than “common” people, since he has “made it” : he belongs to a superior category. Therefore he does not have to speak to “lowly” people, to “others” , or he looks down on them and speaks to them in a conceited and patronizing way. He does not consider it interesting or challenging to engage in a real dialogue with “inferior” persons, including for a professor his students. And what is “different” arouses in the scholar scorn or rejection, including toward his own peers.

Heteronomy

There is dependence on constant external validation, producing a dependence on authorities, institutions or general recognition. This permanent quest for acknowledgment forces the person to play by the “rules” , independently of their legitimacy or their rationality. The phenomenon is quite similar to the pursuit of “likes” , the approbation fever on social media, except the approving crowd is in general more delimited, which is even more anxiogenic.

Wariness

The obligation to follow the rules of the established order rather than creating one’s own rules engenders fear, as any transgression will be “punished”, psychologically, symbolically or materially. This engenders a lack of authenticity and audacity. One does not dare to go to the essence of things, by focusing more on formalities and rules. Therefore engaging in some “unverified” or original interpretations is considered dangerous. It is then better to account for any phenomenon through some “secured” explanation, established and accepted.

Pomposity

Working within the academic world can give an impression of doing something important and deep, in opposition to other activities that might be considered more vain, banal, unhealthy or superficial, for example business occupations. An academic will often think that his field or research is more crucial or fundamental than anything else, including what other colleagues do. He gets caught in his own sensation of depth, a vision full of grandeur, which gives him access to the “real thing” . He will therefore easily pontificate, he will speak with a certain codified verbal tone, rather dull and affected, pedantic and seemingly profound. Through his abstract and rare speech, he will pretend to have privileged access to the “essence” , the very substance of reality.

Purism

Engaging with any layman in a dialogue is often considered dirty, impure and debased. While confining himself in his office, laboratory or library, with books, experiments and concepts, constitute a refined and sophisticated activity. It gives the impression of dealing

with something truly authentic, unlike vulgar occupations. The scholar is as well a jealous guardian of the right vocabulary, of the right reference, of the true idea. He belongs to an elite, separating itself from the “unworthy” people, which can easily include one’s own students, and even one’s peers. The purism and arrogance of the academic makes him think that worldly matters are an obstacle in the path of fulfilling superior academic tasks. In fact, dealing with worldly matters generates anxiety and agitation for the academic who is addicted to the confinement of his academic sphere and who cannot handle some daily tasks, especially when these are purely practical.

Glorification

There is a certain satisfying point or level that one can reach in the academic ladder. A given number of qualifications, recognition or status, that can be considered adequate and glorious enough. When this point is reached, one can rest on this pedestal and benefit from it. Of course, once there, one does not need to “unlearn” and shift his perspective, since one does not want to step down from a pedestal that was earned with time

and such difficulty. Although in reality, this pedestal is never truly satisfying, a certain greed and anxiety keeps gnawing his soul. That is why criticism and objections are always so painful, which make scholars so sensitive and susceptible.

Ignorance of the self

Engrossed in issues of status, recognition and knowledge, the scholar does not reflect upon his own self. His preoccupation is primarily about external issues, what he has, not what he is. He generally avoids dealing with his own existential issues, unless they impose themselves on his own functioning, which then takes a painful and even a pathological form. His being is primarily socially determined, he has a difficult time to examine and confront his own self and existence. He has worked so hard to obtain some satisfactions that he is not able to question or critically examine his own functioning and values. The higher the status, the harsher and insurmountable is the introspection, since there is too much to give up. Therefore, the challenge of his own being is rather absent, and even avoided.

Dogmatism

Since the beginning of his career, the scholar identifies himself with the external approbation of his work. As time will go, he will learn more and more to protect and defend himself his production against all objections and criticism, as he will strongly identify with this production. He will develop a spirit of seriousness, where his subjective perspective and own personal stands or theories will represent for him the objective truth to fight for, a positioning that will easily lead him to a rigid and conflictual stance. Any rethinking or problematization of his own ideas becomes then impossible. There is as well a form of collective dogmatism, encountered for example in school of thought or in the publishing business: in order to get published in a given journal, one has to be cohesive with the intellectual positioning of this journal, and better even, provide a minimal quantity of citations and articles from this journal. Trends of place and time, specific cultures, foster this dogmatism as well.

Patronage

The permanent quest for status has both symbolic and material implications. As a consequence, there is a strong tendency toward power games and clan behavior, as a gregarious protection scheme. This will take place between persons that have personal relations, collaborators in a program, or promoters of a common school of thought. As well, such a kickback system of mutual support takes place between a professor and his graduate students, actual or former, to the extent there was no disagreement between them. This social pact will function for publishing, getting promotions or tenures, budget allowances, etc.

Hypocrisy

There are different levels of hypocrisy in the academic world. The first one is on the institutional level, where it presents itself as a purely disinterested body, only concerned with promoting the education and development of the youth, and knowledge in order to enlighten and better society. When in fact all types of calculations and hidden agendas permeate it: the self-interest of the institution is a primary concern,

as an agent for ideological and political schemes, social control or financial issues. The second one is on the career aspect of the professionals, seeking for personal advancement, power or recognition. From this standpoint, open truth and criticism are not so welcome, since individual or collective calculations and strategy constitute the core dynamic of this endeavor. Negating problems and avoiding conflicts are crucial parts of this diplomatic game. The third is on the level of students, where obtaining a diploma is in general the primary concern, with the career perspective, far above any other idealistic goal, a reality which is widely known but not publicly mentioned. Another periodical form of hypocrisy is a phenomenon of “false humility”, expressed by such ritual expressions as “If I am not wrong”, “Tell me if I am mistaken” or diverse pseudo self-deprecating or self-doubting formulations. One is advised to not take it literally and attempt to criticize, it would most likely be considered uncouth and a declaration of war.

Good conscience

The academic institution always pretends to represent the good, even in the worse contexts we encounter in history. And most actors of the institution go along with this image production, either for believing it or for practical reasons, in order to avoid problems. Even conflicting cliques or clubs make a common front in order to defend the corporation against any criticism. The goal of the institution in general, or any particular academic structure, its nature, its participants, are all sort of covered by a holy veil, all well-meaning and acting out for the best for society. Doubting or questioning its morality or motivation is viewed as a suspicious and impious plot.

Compliance

The better the academic is at ticking boxes, filling out forms, appearing to follow rules, replicating the global plan and looking good, the more successful he will be. Thus many such persons undergo career promotions who are far from being better teachers. So it is for pedagogical theoreticians, who manage to sell some “brilliant” schemes: once recognized, such successful

persons are the ones who instruct those who are in the classroom how they should teach. The pressure can be strong, especially with the present “evaluation” trend, where teachers need to regularly report results according to established standards and provide good looking data for the next administrative level. We should not forget the compliance with ambient ideological social schemes, in spite of the pretension of academia to be a place for free, open and rational thinking.

Omnipotence

The impression of knowing a lot, more than most people, access to sophisticated speech, to reasoning and rhetoric, the learned power of argumentation, can easily engender a sense of omnipotence. Theory can naturally foster a sense of ultimacy, above any practical endeavors and personal existential issues, since it pretends, consciously or not, to define and exhaust reality. Ideas can in this sense take a religious form and become unchecked, or uncheckable, endowing their author with a form of drunkenness, a manic elation, a feeling of communion with the absolute.

Susceptibility

Beneath the appearance of objectivity, rational detachment, and logical coherence, there often lies a hypersensitive temperament. Academics, strongly attached to their status and the recognition of their work, struggle to handle criticism. Behind the erudition, formalism, and rhetorical skill, there is an emotional dimension that is frequently denied yet omnipresent: the slightest challenge is experienced as a personal attack. The façade of seriousness and coldness serves to mask this vulnerability, but it reveals itself in condescending reactions, in the disdain or hostility displayed toward criticism, whether it comes from fellow academics or, even more so, from the common crowd. This susceptibility makes genuine dialogue difficult, as it prevents them from receiving contradiction as an enriching intellectual challenge, reducing it instead to a narcissistic wound.

Moreover, academics often express their sensitivity through an ambivalent attitude toward their own milieu. They act both as its defenders and its critics: they protect it passionately against “external” attacks, but do not hesitate to highlight its flaws when among

trusted peers. This paradox stems from the fact that their identity is emotionally bound to their academic belonging, even as they remain lucid, sometimes bitter, about its limitations and often critical of their colleagues. This susceptibility makes them simultaneously defensive and wary, shaping their discourse according to the context and the audience, as they seek an unstable balance between corporatism, competition, and the desire for recognition.