

Academic freedom and forms of autonomy (0124)

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With the current renewed interest in the place of freedom in higher education processes and practices shown, for instance, in the conference call and Joanna Williams's (2016) recent book, it is important to test whether it is possible to construct a robust defence of academic freedom. The desirability of upholding academic freedom has come under attack not just concretely, from government policy which over the years has been introducing greater regulation and control over higher education processes and causing the fragmentation of the once relative homogeneity of academic job roles and status (Nixon, 1997, p. 100; Rowland, 2006).

Academic work, especially research enquiry, *prima facie* seems to require self-direction and so one of these *sine qua non* characteristics is a certain sort of (academic) freedom. The academic worker, as a *bona fide* representative of the institution, is doing their job insofar as they are autonomously pursuing their own lines of enquiry and following actions concomitant with this. So it may still surprise that there is an intellectual challenge specifically to the centrality of academic freedom as something gratuitous (Nixon et al., 2001, p. 234), that such freedom is not even especially important to defend against eroding tendencies. 'Academic freedom is, ultimately, freedom for the academic' (Nixon, 2001, p. 175): opposing this claim would beg the question what is special about this occupational group.

My argument in this paper is instead that it is not that simple, that Nixon's stance, that there is no special licence for academic freedom, for autonomy in academic work, does not stand up to scrutiny. This is because Nixon has not appreciated the distinction between two senses of autonomy in relation to work. These senses, supplied by John White, are, respectively, 'autonomous work' and 'autonomy in work'.

Autonomous work 'is a form of activity whose end-product (X) is chosen as such as a major goal of an autonomous agent' (White, 1997, p. 5). Heteronomous work, by contrast, is conducted by agents who have no particular wish to produce what is the end-product of that work. They would be employed in the work for another reason, which could be the obvious, personally significant and non-gratuitous goal just of earning a living or providing for their family, in other words primarily as a means to that important end. Or it might be that many who go into certain posts do so primarily to get promoted, enjoy prestige, wealth or power over others (White, 1997, p. 51).

One of the main points is that, in principle, for White, the character of the work, as either autonomous or heteronomous, is agent-relative. In other words, the very same job, and any job, could be autonomous for some when it is heteronomous for others. He therefore rejects Hannah Arendt's (1958) agent-neutral distinction between 'work' and 'labour'. The pessimistic trend in western society is towards one where more of us are increasingly confined to a condition of consumption and labour for that consumption, rather than working to craft something more meaningful of our own design.

If any line of work can in principle be autonomous for some agent or other, I argue now that the reverse is not so. That is, not every line of work can be engaged in properly taken on simply as heteronomous work, and academic work is an example (Arendt gives artistic work as her exemplar: 1958, pp. 127–128). The test of my claim is the consideration of it as possibly heteronomous work when done properly. Following White's position in principle, it is possible to take on academic work just as a job which happens to be available amongst others and such that your real goals in life do not lie here particularly. I would contend, however, that it would not be possible to develop in that job and so it is not one where you could conduct it properly. This is because you need to find intellectual problems and their solutions intrinsically amongst the core of your concerns, make those problems and the enquiries into them your own. It would be practically impossible to flourish in this work and your life if these enquiries are not your own autonomously chosen goals.

At first glance the distinction between autonomous work and autonomy in work might appear to provide ammunition for Nixon's position. That is, following White in making the distinction absolute, he could say that the need for academic workers to be engaged in their work as autonomous does not equate to support for the special levels of autonomy in work called for by his target opponents. But it does not follow from the empirical claim that the academic workplace is changing to becoming more managerialist that we should give up on the prerogative of autonomy inherent in the traditional nature of the academic workplace. Unless they have that autonomy to organise their own schedule of enquiry and much of their work around their enquiry, in other words autonomy in work, the work will cease to be effectively autonomous for them and cannot be conducted properly as a result. Against both Nixon and White, the autonomous character of academic work is the key factor rather than the assertion of the importance of autonomy in work *per se* but in academic work the former is seriously undermined without high levels of the latter.

Even though I have found Nixon's dismissal of academic freedom to be fundamentally wanting, there is no contradiction between supporting this academic freedom and also promoting two of Nixon's substantive recommendations under his 'new professionalism' banner. One requires promoting the identity of the academic as an educator rather than simply as an enquirer in the sense of the research role alone. The other is that there is a duty to promote freedom and autonomy as a wider societal goal. I suggest that the demonstration of responsible autonomy, the rationally rather than gratuitously framed pursuit of new lines of enquiry, serves this wider societal purpose very well.

References

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