

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Student Freedom, Doctoral Quality and the Wellbeing Agenda

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Abstract: In important ways the traditional PhD is in the academic career the zenith of freedom creatively to explore and articulate one's own contribution to knowledge. Many doctoral candidates embrace this freedom and thrive, some others find this position anguish-inducing (Sartre 1958). Chronic anxiety about this situation may lead to mental ill health, in which generally there is heightened interest in the HE sector, the PGR population prone to experiencing problems in this way (Pierson 2019). But does anguish, in the freedom to choose your own research direction, itself constitute a reduction of wellbeing in any sense? Conceptual analysis and argument, as a method, provides the answer: no. Anguish is a wellbeing problem neither on the utilitarian / medicalised deficit models nor on the Aristotelian epistemic model. Promoting avenues for freedom is essential for quality and does promote wellbeing, as flourishing, on the epistemic model.

Paper: In important ways the traditional PhD is, or should be, the zenith of freedom in the career of the academic worker, at this point both as postgraduate research student and as proto-academic staff (doctoral) researchers (and, variously, at the same time novice teacher), and for probably most of those doctoral graduates who go on to take up other careers. The doctoral researcher is to establish a thesis: which is to find their problem, devise their approach, seek out their sources of data and information and work their way through them to articulate their own original contribution. Underpinned by the dictum that in the Academy we "emphasise the intrinsic values of curiosity and a thirst for knowledge" (Rowland 2006, p58), the time and space made available for carrying this out independently forms a special place in the academic (and any other) career trajectory.

Many doctoral candidates embrace this freedom and thrive, some others find this position anguish-inducing, through coming "face-to-face with nothingness", i.e. nothing but one's own freedom (Sartre 1958, Part 1 chapter 1, pp17+29-35), and flounder in the face of, in effect, constructing their own curriculum. It constitutes a huge step up from the taught Master's study regime, with the undergraduate study regime left further behind, notwithstanding the importance of student freedom at those levels as an end in itself and also for more successful educational outcomes (MacFarlane

2017). Yet career advancement, even in the academic domain, can see the researcher then suddenly restricted, certainly in the formal lined managed way (in the Anglo-American environment, at least), if not as postdoc Big Science lab drone then as early career academic distorting their interests to fit into someone else's REF strategy.

It is never been the case that anything goes in the PhD environment and, rather than being just open-ended process, its status as task to be completed, even in 'timely' fashion, is now foregrounded in institutional and wider expectations. But, if this level of education should serve greater societal ends and if we should, anyway, be reducing non-completion statistics resulting from this flight from freedom (Sartre 1958, Part 1 chapter 2, pp47-70), should we go the whole hog and instead re-envisage the PhD enquiry more as a project defined by someone else? With or without, for instance, the ever-shifting Teaching Excellence Framework for UK HE and the vague prospects for its applicability to the postgraduate levels, in light of the increasing diversity of doctoral degree forms, how important is the current space for freedom to operate key to the quality both of thesis and of graduate entering the next stage of working life?

We need to return to Sartre's contribution to our intellectual heritage to remind us of our human limitations and condition, and ultimately to answer these questions. I am a researcher but I cannot be, since I am not what I am. In other words, what I have achieved so far is thing-like, just 'is', the 'in-itself', my facticity (my PhD and journal articles are writing dead on the page, as Socrates would say, as in Plato's *Phaedrus*). I cannot identify with that since if I did then I am lifeless, just a thing. Embracing the role of researcher/enquirer too closely, as a role fitting in to some institutional process, would make me too thing-like. Rather, I am what I am not. In other words, I go beyond such a role, transcend that, for instance to find new intellectual places, I am heading there but these places are necessarily ahead of me, not yet me.

Arguably, the same sort of issue faces the teacher in higher education: the condition of the teacher is like the condition of the researcher. Is this a role, in the sense of behaviours being specified, so to be a teacher is to embrace certain behaviours and therefore be (albeit in a different way) as much in *mauvais foi* as the researcher in higher education who insincerely refuses to recognise their pedagogical possibilities? To identify too wholeheartedly with being a teacher is to make oneself too thing-like and more susceptible to someone else's indicators of performance regarding the role of the teacher (a point explored by Brady 2019). The individual who is about to teach can, however, gain solace from the researcher, who is more obviously at face value condemned to be free, since the teacher, unlike Sartre's Parisian waiter, too can treat their space of action and interaction as an enquiry of possibilities yet to be realized, rather than as just delivery of pre-determined curriculum items, delivered with sanctioned crowd-pleasing demeanour.

I have quickly moved from considering the early career academic who is still in the student phase to the academic teacher and researcher in general. But, as in the examples Sartre chooses to make his

point, the novice postgraduate researcher and teacher will be experiencing the disconcerting aspects of the 'academic condition' most acutely. So we must acknowledge the all-pervasive wellbeing agenda as a dimension of the picture. Chronically floundering with anxiety in the face of the task of taking your research forward may ultimately lead to mental ill health. Generally there is heightened interest in the HE sector, with a higher proportion of the PGR population, than other populations, being reported as experiencing problems in this way and needing targeted response (Panger et al. 2014, Guthrie et al. 2017; Levecque et al. 2017; Ayres 2019; Pierson 2019; Lane et al. 2019). But does anguish, in the freedom to choose your own research direction, itself constitute a reduction of wellbeing? No: anguish in this context is not *fear* of freedom (Barnett 2007, invoking Erich Fromm) as such, neither is it constituted by fear of knowledge (Williams 2016), and in itself it is a wellbeing problem neither on the utilitarian / medicalised and other deficit models (c.f. Ecclestone & Hayes 2008 on the 'diminished subject') nor on the Aristotelian epistemic model. Rather, promoting avenues for freedom is essential for doctoral quality and does promote wellbeing, as flourishing, on the epistemic model (Gough 2000).

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