Academic Values and the Possibility of an Academic Impartial Spectator:
A Response to Emily Chamlee-Wright's
"Self-Censorship and Associational Life in the Liberal Academy"
Andrew Jason Cohen

Emily Chamlee-Wright is clearly right that self-censorship is an issue of concern within the academy. How much of a problem it is—how widespread and how bad it is when it occurs—is unclear and difficult to quantify. Administrators, faculty, and students all self-censor from time to time. Sometimes the self-censorship is just a matter of being polite or exercising pedagogical restraint, as Chamlee-Wright notes. The worry, of course, is that sometimes it prevents open and honest discussion about difficult topics and thus stymies learning and truth-seeking. While I will keep these caveats in mind, I also want to help strengthen Chamlee-Wright's case. I will also, though, point out a difficulty.

A. Abrasion and Civility

Throughout her essay, Chamlee-Wright discusses abrasion and civility, varyingly speaking of them as principles, values, and norms. We should understand these, I think, as instrumentally valuable norms in academia. They are instrumentally valuable for all truth-seeking discourse and so valuable for academics who are supposed to be dedicated to truth seeking. Where they are used against truth seeking—when civility "drift[s] into uncritical conformity" (ECWv2 13) or abrasion "takes the form of punishment" (ECWv2, 6)—they have only disvalue.

Abrasion—the discomfort we feel when we come up against claims that contradict or are in tension with beliefs we hold—helps us improve our understanding of the world by abrading "prior expectations, unexamined assumptions, and the rough edges of lingering" non-academic norms (ECWv2, 5). We thus recognize the importance of acting in ways that provide abrasion for our students and colleagues and in ways that demonstrate we are open to abrasion ourselves. These are norms in academia.

We are more likely to accept abrasive discourse with others when we respect them and when we respect others, we act civilly toward them. This requires that we keep an open mind and assume they are arguing in good faith.[1] It requires appropriate civility. These, too, are norms in academia. Importantly, they do not require—indeed, I think they preclude—pretending to think those others are right about some topic when you do not. Civility is required, but not to the extent that we refrain from reason (see ECWv2, 7). That sort of pretense—which is likely implicated in civility for civility's sake—is a failure to show respect. If you don't indicate your disagreement with an interlocutor, it would seem that you think she is *not worth* correcting—i.e., that you do not respect her.

Quality discourse requires respect wherein we "recognize, in ourselves and in our conversation partners, our underlying humanity" (ECWv2, 6). It requires civility and abrasion. We must show respect, operate civilly and in good faith, willingly engaging in abrasive (but civil) discourse, and assume our interlocutors do the same.

B. Quality Discourse

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[1] Chamlee-Wright makes this point here: https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/08/13/need-presume-good-faith-campus-conversations-and-debates-opinion.

Following Stevens et al (2018), Chamlee-Wright tells us that "Reports of increased self-censorship suggest that illiberalism in the academy is taking its toll on the quality of academic discourse, which has downstream effects on the quality of public discourse" (ECWv2, 2). This is likely true,[2] but it's worth noting that there are two relevant types of quality worth considering here: openness and verity.[3] In brief, discourse has the quality of openness when all or most parties to the discourse are ready and willing to consider any and all claims.[4] Discourse has the quality of verity, by contrast, when all or most claims made are true or at least sincerely believed by the speakers. Discourse is ideal, we can say, when it has both of these qualities—these are the intrinsic qualities we promote as academics. When no one lies, postures, or otherwise attempts to mislead, the discourse can progress most usefully so that all learn and truth is uncovered and shared. Importantly, though, the two forms of quality can be in tension.

Consider a symposium on the nature of rights. One speaker believes theory A about rights (perhaps that rights are grounded in welfare), another believes theory B (perhaps that rights are grounded in choice). But other participants in the discussion are less concerned with the *nature of rights* and more concerned with the way rights are used. Perhaps they are concerned to make clear their sincere opposition to the way rights talk was used by colonizing powers. Or, differently, how it's used in contemporary discussions of health care. If the symposium is meant to be about the *nature* of rights, discussion about the misapplication of rights talk will prevent the positive outcome the first two speakers seek—even assuming the other participants are completely earnest. That is, the combination of openness and verity reduce the likelihood of success in the pursuit of truth about the topic it hand.

When Chamlee-Wright worries about the reduced quality of academic discourse caused by self-censorship, the concern is most likely directly with a decrease in openness—which, in turn, can lead to a decrease in successful pursuit of truth. In the example I just provided, though, a decrease in openness—barring discussion of colonial powers, current healthcare policy, and the use of rights talk in each—might well improve the academic outcome of the discussion, at least in so far as the concern is to determine the most plausible theory of the nature of rights. Indeed, Alvin Goldman has argued that we need some general reduction in openness in order to increase truth discovery and dissemination.

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[2] Some political scientists are pessimistic. In "Democracy Devouring Itself: The Rise of the Incompetent Citizen and the Appeal of Populism" (forthcoming in *Psychology of Political and Everyday Extremisms,* edited by Domenico Uhng Our and José Manuel Sabucedo), Shawn Rosenberg argues that democracy has a structural weakness that makes it prey for populism. That weakness is a cognitive matter that might be thought linked to a failure to maintain robust discourse and if academics cannot maintain robust discourse (with abrasion and civility), it would be unsurprising if it cannot be maintained in society at large. It may be that we need to encourage it in broader civil society in order to strengthen it in the academy. See also Yascha Mounk's *The People Vs. Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2018) and David Runciman's *How Democracy Ends* (Basic Books, 2018).

[3] I use "verity" to mean "commitment to truth." It is a matter of epistemic probity wherein the aim is truth and accuracy. It does not entail that only truths are told; we do not increase knowledge by only discussing truths. We increase knowledge (and wisdom!) By discussing claims accepted as truths, claims that are contested as truths, and claims used to contest claims accepted as truths. Some of each of these may be true and some of each may be false. We do not limit ourselves to discourse with those with whom we agree or those we know to be speaking truthfully; we do limit ourselves—or try to—to discourse with those whom we believe are honestly committed to truth. Honest commitment to truth entails a certain humility that one might be mistaken.

[4] Obviously, this comes in degrees. Some will consider *any* claim. Others might wish to refrain from considering claims that have, in their views, been completely disproven (perhaps as a matter of scientific consensus). I think we have good reason to want academics to consider any and all claims, even if only to show how they can be set aside.

The case for limiting openness is not far-fetched. Academic journals use reviewers and editors in order to limit what they publish. The goal is specifically to limit openness to work that is deemed significant and rigorous enough by those qualified to judge it. Even in non-academic publications there is usually some way of limiting what is published. Newspapers may publish editorials, but not all editorials they receive. None of this is particularly problematic. We don't want to open a newspaper or an academic journal to be bombarded with irrelevant or shoddy material. As Goldman notes, complete openness does not guarantee that the discourse "will actually track the dialectical merits of the countervailing arguments."[5] And he is likely right that gatekeepers can improve the overall level of truth acquisition—at least in some ways.[6] However, this is a *local matter,* one wherein members of a specific and narrow community do better vis-a-vis truth acquisition by having gatekeepers.

In my view—and I suspect Chamlee-Wright would concur[7]—what matters is broader. No one seriously suggests requiring a journal or newspaper to publish everything that is submitted to the editor. Nonetheless, we ought to allow—in different outlets, as people see fit—all sorts of claims, perhaps even false claims. When an on-line site publishes an article making demonstrably false claims, some may well believe those claims and this may cause them to lead worse lives than they could. Nonetheless, a general policy of toleration toward such publications is likely, on whole, to increase truth acquisition. This is so for straightforward reasons laid out by John Stuart Mill long ago. People will be encouraged to discuss the claims—hopefully abrading the false elements. People will be encouraged to develop their reasoning skills as they consider the false claims—especially when those false claims are contradicted by other claims or shown to entail other, perhaps more obviously, false claims. Of course, some people will also publish responses to the original mistaken pieces. All of these are important in a society that values free speech and open inquiry and all lead to greater appreciation of the truth by members of society at large. In other words, verity is increased.

In publications aimed at narrow audiences, there will be narrow limits of discourse. In society as a whole there should be few if any limits. The *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, and *Breitbart* can all exist alongside one another. They each have their own audience, some are more committed to openness than others, and some are more committed to verity than others. That they co-exist is to be admired, not bemoaned.

C. Impartial Spectator vs. Role Models (Smith vs. Aristotle)

Following Adam Smith, Chamlee-Wright nicely points out that we—those of us in academia and elsewhere—"need a 'compass' that helps us sort through feedback signals effectively" (ECWv2, 10). Smith takes the "impartial spectator" to fill that role.

> As Smith describes it, the impartial spectator develops through experience. We learn our first lessons at an early age, when we venture beyond the (partial) gaze of close kin to the company of (less-partial) friends. Whereas mother and father may be inclined to indulge misbehavior, our playfellows will not be so forgiving. We will feel the abrasive sting of their disapprobation if we violate the informal norms of play or act inappropriately. We also experience the warm glow of approval when we measure up in their eyes. … In this way, we

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[5] Alvin Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 212. I discuss this argument in my *Toleration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014) at 136-140.

[6] Ibid, 189.

[7] See her "Governing Campus Speech: A Bottom-Up Approach" in this journal, Volume 55, Issue 5, pp 392-402.

> learn to align our thoughts, emotions, and actions with the sentiments of the broader society. (ECWv2, 10)

On this reading, we each are (or have) our own impartial spectator, which develops by interacting with others. All of the standard objections to impartial spectator theories are relevant here. For our purposes, we can confine ourselves to one—and a fairly narrow specification thereof. If our parents believe X (say that blond, blue-eyed, caucasians are naturally superior to all others) and we only ever interact with people who believe the same thing—because our parents live in a community with only people that agree—we are likely to internalize the same view.[8] If everyone around us believes that questioning that belief is evil, we are likely to internalize that as well. In short, our impartial spectator is not likely to be very impartial. It is likely to be as impartial or as partial (or warped) as those we are in community with. The worry, then, is that "Checking our conduct (or prospective conduct) against how 'other people' will view it" won't help us act or believe well, but will only "assure that we are adhering to rules we acquire through associational life" whether the association we find ourselves in be virtuous or vicious (ECWv2, 10).

The problem is straightforward: "a more advanced developmental stage of the impartial spectator becomes important when we come to recognize that the general public [and even the academic elite] is not always fair in its judgement" (ECWv2, 11), but its not clear how we reach that more advanced stage in a developmental process dependent on that same general public or academic elite. Perhaps Smith is right when he claims, as Chamlee-Wright notes, that "small injustices" wherein "the public fails to offer praise even when one's conduct is praiseworthy" help us "come to learn the important distinction between a love of praise (i.e., chasing the affection of the public), and a love of doing that which is *worthy* of praise (i.e., earning the respect of the impartial judge)" (ECWv2, 11), but if so, this is not due to developing an impartial spectator in association with that public. That public can't give us the virtue we need to internalize if it doesn't possess it.

Absent a recognized impartial view, what is needed—Chamlee-Wright would agree, as indicated by her discussion of mentors in her conclusion—is morally worthy role models. If young academics want to succeed while participating in and building intellectual discourse, they need to internalize the virtues that are praiseworthy therein rather than simply acting in ways that receive praise. As receiving praise from bad actors may not mean one is praiseworthy, it is too quick to say "The impartial spectator's approval and disapproval is the guidance the scholar needs to determine whether greater intellectual distance from the general academic public is required" (ECWv2, 12). If the impartial spectator's approval is derived from internalizing the mores of one's community and one's community is populated by vicious rather than virtuous people, it will not help the academic perform virtuously. The issue here is epistemological: we can't know if our impartial spectator has been cultivated well. The only solution is Aristotle's: we must seek to imitate those who are further along the path of virtue than we are ourselves. As Chamlee-Wright notes, "the wise scholar will consult an actual colleague with a reputation for impartiality and wisdom" (ECWv2, 14). Academic institutions can conceivably help with this by promoting those along that path and encouraging younger faculty to consider them mentors, as Chamlee-Wright suggests, but we are still left with the question "how do we know who they are?"

Perhaps this problem seems relatively innocuous as we "know them when we see them," but I am at least somewhat skeptical. My skepticism does not prevent me from endorsing Chamlee-Wright's proposal. I simply also worry about who will choose the next generation of mentors. Nonetheless, if

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[8] The singing duo Prussian Blue might be thought to exemplify this.

we can agree about who the mentors should be—what they should be like—the potential lack of impartiality would be less of a concern. It seems to me that we can—and do—often agree about this, but I am uncertain as to how likely it is that such agreement will continue to be found as readily as it has been.

D. The Likely Impartial Spectator

Chamlee-Wright is clearly right that "none of us arrives on the scene of academic or public discourse fully formed" (ECWv2, 15). It might be important, though, that some come "more formed" than others. Many in academia come from families of Phds, JDs, or MDs and grew up hearing and participating in debates at the dinner table, at breakfast, or at other family gatherings. Some grew up with the latter even if their parents did not have advanced degrees. Some, though, had neither. One would expect those who grew up with these advantages to develop within the academy differently— perhaps faster—than those who did not. The former have, after all, been raised by parents that value discourse, many of whom can not only help their children navigate the college and graduate school worlds that are foreign to others, but also likely use far more of the language common in academia than others. A young man raised by a truck driver and a house-cleaner who must work long hours is less likely to speak the way an academic does (or have time for debate) than one raised by a lawyer and a physician.

The point here is relevant to Chamlee-Wright's discussion. Because we develop the impartial spectator in society with others, the fact that some are raised by families with academic degrees or interests and others are not would almost certainly affect how each develops their own impartial spectator. This is, after all, a story of psychological development. It would be interesting, in this light, to see empirically if ideological differences at all track these differences of upbringing. For example, just as those raised in families where academic degrees are absent may be less embroiled in the existing academic way of thinking, they may have a sense of the impartial spectator that is less committed to academic conventions—and thus, be more likely to have academic views outside the norm.

If some percentage of academics bring with them norms imbibed in families and neighborhoods without academic niceties, one would expect that to affect the way those academics participate in the academic project, including how they engage in academic discourse. Some of this will be tempered by the pressures Chamlee-Wright discusses, but we should expect that these individuals will have a harder time "navigating the inherent tensions of associational life" in academia and that this may well mean "the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful academic career" (ECWv2, 4). Self-censoring will smooth over many of the coarser differences, providing clear benefits: the discourse can continue with fewer difficulties. Nonetheless, as Chamlee-Wright notes, it may reduce the overall quality of discourse.[9]

Conclusion

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[9] Chamlee-Wright is clearly correct that the tensions she discusses and I amplify are present in the lives of our undergraduates as well. I am less certain that she is right that they "know that intellectual challenge is essential to a successful college experience [but] … recognize that a price is paid if they deviate too far from orthodox views of the modern academy" (ibid). Many students that come with familiarity with the vocabulary of academics seem to come expecting to have to memorize rather than engage in abrasive challenge—a failure of a moral kind as Chamlee-Wright notes (ECWv2, 7). Some that come without that vocabulary seem quite ready to engage in the challenge—perhaps even debating some academic orthodoxy—a failure of a social kind that might not be forgiven by all of their professors.

I'll end by noting that Chamlee-Wright is correct that "in a liberal democratic society, talk matters" and that the "propensity to engage in moral and intellectual discourse is the mother of robust civic engagement and sets in motion a bulwark against tyranny" (ECWv2, 3). I think she and I also share a concern that such discourse has decreased. I admit to being unsure of this; as Chamlee-Wright notes and Khalil Habib argues, de Tocqueville had similar worries.[10] Perhaps what we really need is a deep cultural change such that children hear their families discussing politics and religion at home, with friends, and elsewhere, rather than being told never to discuss these most intimate topics. Such a change would encourage respectful—that is civil and abrasive—discourse throughout our lives, thus allowing the academy to be something of a capstone or model to what exists everywhere rather than the seemingly lone exception to be drowned in the broader society's inability to tolerate either abrasiveness or genuine pursuit of knowledge.

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[10] See Khalil M. Habib's "Persecution and the Art of Freedom: Alexis de Tocqueville on the Importance of Free Press and Free Speech in Democratic Society" (forthcoming, *Social Philosophy and Policy*). In *The Present Age,* Kierkegaard, a contemporary of Tocqueville's, pressed similar concerns.