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Jakub Łakomy*
University of Wrocław

The professor, the political activist, and the professional on the tightropes of culture wars: Stanley Fish's *Versions of academic freedom***

He who fights with monsters must take care… for if you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes into you.
Friedrich Nietzsche

Truth is what your contemporaries let you get away with.
Richard Rorty

1. Introduction

Academia today is hurt by intensifying culture wars[1] and torn by internal conflicts due to controversies over speech, censorship, and institutional neutrality. There is a pressing need for a coherent, clear, and convincing vision of academic freedom so that it is

* ORCID: 0000-0002-6655-6787, email: jakub.lakomy2@uwr.edu.pl
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[1] For the most important sources about culture wars, see: J.D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America,* Basic Books, New York, 1991; A. Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*,

clear what academic teachers can do to ensure that their rights are respected and well legitimized in society's eyes. Debates surrounding academic freedom, once perhaps confined to specialized journals or faculty senates, now erupt regularly into the public sphere, often fuelled by political polarization and disagreements about the very purpose of higher education in a liberal democratic society.

In this political and historical context, the traditional liberal justifications for academic freedom, grounded in the pursuit of objective truth, the marketplace of ideas, or individual autonomy, appear increasingly unpersuasive. Many perceive them as naive illusions, others as insufficient bulwarks against new forms of ideological pressure from both within and outside the university walls.[2] In those volatile times, Stanley Fish intervened with his *Versions of academic freedom: From professionalism to revolution*, the book which is my paper's main focus of analysis.[3]

Versions of academic freedom[4] is, as Fish himself declares in the preface, a "thesis book".[5] It does not aim for a complete historical, philosophical, sociological or legal analysis, and explicitly sets aside detailed comparative analysis or engagement with issues like tenure, funding, or technology. Instead, its purpose is philosophical and analytical; to reconstruct and analyse the various "ways people talk about academic freedom" and the often unexamined "presuppositions (about truth, the purpose of education, and the social/political function of the academy)" underpinning that talk.[6] Fish aims to analyse the "complex subject" of academic freedom in the United States, complicated by the lack of a clear statutory or constitutional foundation comparable to that found elsewhere, and by the persistent confusion between its legal and professional concepts. His central thesis, developed systematically throughout the book, is that the only coherent and defensible version of academic freedom is one grounded strictly in professionalism, specifically, the view articulated by what he calls the "It's Just a Job" school.

Versions represents a focused application of Fish's broader neopragmatist, antifoundationalist, and conventionalist concepts to the specific domain of academic freedom. The core concepts are familiar to readers of Fish: the rejection of abstract,

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University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2016; I.T. Thomson, *Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2016; M.P. Fiorina, S.J. Abrams, J.C. Pope, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, 3rd edition, Longman, New York 2010.

2 Liberal arguments in the context of freedom of speech are presented by Paweł Jabłoński in: P. Jabłoński, P. Kaczmarek, M. Wojtanowski, *Wolność ekspresji sędziego w czasach kryzysu kultury politycznoprawnej* [Eng. *Freedom of expression of a judge in times of a crisis of political and legal culture*], Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2024, pp. 23–40 and the literature cited there.

3 S. Fish, *Versions of academic freedom: From professionalism to revolution*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2014.

4 Hereinafter *Versions* in the main text.

5 S. Fish, *Versions of academic freedom*…, p. ix.

6 *Ibidem*, p. ix.

context-independent principles,[7] the focus on the primacy of practice over theory,[8] and the crucial role of interpretive communities in generating meaning.[9] In *Versions*, the university and its disciplines are viewed as specific interpretive communities, defined not by universal ideals but by particular, historically contingent professional goals and standards, which Fish, in his earlier works – and implicitly here – terms as "professional correctness".[10] The book's argument is being constructed mainly through a critical typology of five "schools" or "versions" of academic freedom, each embodying a different understanding of the relationship between academic duties, individual freedom, and broader moral and political values in society. Fish identifies these schools, putting them on a political continuum from right (as he perceives it) to left.[11]

The first school is called "It's Just a Job" school, which is Fish's own position. This concept views higher education as a specific professional service (advancing knowledge and disciplinary skills). Academic freedom is merely the tool necessary to perform this job according to internal professional standards, distinct from general free speech or political activism. It emphasises "academicizing" topics rather than taking partisan stances.[12]

The second one is called "For the Common Good" school. This view justifies academic freedom by its contribution to democracy and the public good (e.g., providing expertise, creating critical citizenship). Fish criticises this school for making academic values less important than some external goals.[13]

The third one is called the "Academic Exceptionalism or Uncommon Beings" school. It is an extension of the "common good" view, arguing that academics possess special virtues or perform such a crucial societal role that they deserve exemptions from rules governing ordinary citizens or employees. Fish analyses and largely rejects this claim, particularly in the context of public employee law.[14]

The fourth school is called the "Academic Freedom as Critique" school. Connected with figures like Judith Butler, this school sees the core academic obligation as critique, not just within disciplines, but of disciplinary norms and societal structures

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[7] S. Fish, *There's no such thing as free speech and it's a good thing, too*, Oxford University Press, New York 1994.

[8] As Fish does in S. Fish, *Doing what comes naturally: Change, rhetoric, and the practice of theory in literary and legal studies*, Duke University Press, Durham – London 1989.

[9] S. Fish, *Is there a text in this class? The authority of interpretive communities*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1980.

[10] S. Fish, *Professional correctness: Literary studies and political change*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1999; idem, *Is there a text*… While *Versions of academic freedom* doesn't use term "professional correctness" even once (!), the underlying concept is identical to his defence of the "It's Just a Job" school.

[11] Fish outlines these schools in chapter 1 of *Versions of academic freedom*…, pp. 1–19, putting them on the political spectrum on p. 7.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 9, 31, 34.

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 11.

themselves. It challenges the separation of academic and political work. Fish argues that this dissolves the specificity of the academic enterprise.[15]

The last school is called the "Academic Freedom as Revolution" school. The most radical position, exemplified by figures like Henry Giroux and Denis Rancourt, sees education as inherently political and academic freedom as an obligation to fight for social justice and revolutionary change, even if it means subverting institutional norms. Fish presents this approach as a clear example of abandoning professionalism.[16]

By analysing these schools, particularly through case studies, Fish consistently argues for the analytical clarity and practical necessity of his preferred "It's Just a Job" model. He tries to persuade the reader that only this narrow, professionalist conception can provide a coherent defence against both external political interference and internal attempts to instrumentalize the university for non-academic ends. By blurring the lines between academic work and political action or universal rights, "versions" two through five increasingly leave academic freedom vulnerable and conceptually undefended.[17]

In this paper, I want to analyse the arguments presented in *Versions*, assess the philosophical coherence, analytical power, and normative implications of Fish's strictly professionalist account, particularly in light of the very "culture war" context he acknowledges. Drawing upon the broader understanding of Fish's neopragmatism and the concept of the political, my paper will argue a twofold thesis.

First of all, Fish's critique of liberal, rights-based, and expansive critical (revolutionary) conceptions of academic freedom in *Versions* is largely successful on its own anti-foundationalist terms. Fish effectively demonstrates the contingency of abstract principles and the dependence of meaning and legitimacy on the internal standards of specific practices, powerfully applying his general interpretive theory to this specific domain. His insistence on distinguishing the academic task from other social or political projects provides a necessary, although uncomfortable, clarification often missing in contemporary debates.

Secondly, despite its internal coherence and critical force, Fish's own preferred "It's Just a Job" model proves ultimately insufficient and potentially problematic as

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 12.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

[17] See, e.g., critiques by Robert Post arguing for a link between academic freedom and democratic competence, discussed and criticised by Fish in chapter 3. R. Post, *Democracy, expertise, and academic freedom: A first amendment jurisprudence for the modern state*, Yale University Press, New Haven – London 2013. "The argument of Post's book develops from an implicit tension between the first two words in its title, democracy and expertise. The relationship between democracy and the First Amendment is often represented by the metaphor of the marketplace of ideas. In a democracy government does not have a proprietary purchase on truth and can neither monopolize the conversation nor dictate its course. The state is only one voice among many and it must allow all voices into the marketplace where, in the fullness of time, the truth will emerge. As Post observes, at the heart of the First Amendment is 'an egalitarian commitment' to the equality of speakers and their ideas." S. Fish, *Versions of academic freedom*…, pp. 44–45.

a complete conception that can be used to analyse academic expression in deeply polarized times. Its rigid defence of professional autonomy risks downplaying internal power dynamics and mechanisms of exclusion within disciplines. The sharp separation of the academic sphere from *the political* seems empirically questionable and normatively limiting in an era where knowledge production is increasingly recognized as intertwined with social problems. Fish's scepticism about normative critique beyond professional standards leaves academics badly equipped to address fundamental challenges to the legitimacy or justice of academic standards themselves.

Therefore, my paper will not only reconstruct Fish's argument in *Versions* but also subject it to critical scrutiny, asking whether his neopragmatism, while useful as a critique, ultimately fails to capture the full ethical and political dimensions of academic life. The structure of my paper is as follows. After this introduction, section two will analyse Fish's preferred model – the "It's Just a Job" school. I will be reconstructing arguments as presented in *Versions*, especially in chapter two of the book, and linking them explicitly to Fish's core philosophical commitments (interpretive communities, anti-foundationalism, conventionalism, among others). In section three, I will focus on Fish's critique of the alternatives, particularly the "For the Common Good" school (chapter three) and the "Critique" and "Revolution" schools (chapters four and six), analysing the rhetorical strategies and theoretical assumptions underpinning his dismissal of these more expansive conceptions. The fourth section of this paper will critically assess the adequacy of Fish's professionalist model in addressing the concrete challenges of contemporary culture wars and political pressures on academia, taking into account the internal tensions and limitations identified above (internal power, boundary permeability, normative deficit). Finally, section five will offer concluding reflections on the value and weaknesses of Fish's contribution in *Versions*, suggesting potential roads for moving beyond his concepts towards a more nuanced, politically aware, and ethically responsible understanding of academic freedom in our time of culture wars. My paper thus aims not only to interpret Fish's book but also to use it as a catalyst for broader reflection on the precarious state of academic freedom and the challenging future of the university itself.

2. The imperatives of the academic job. Unpacking Fish's professionalist conception

Versions positions itself against the perceived conceptual incoherence plaguing contemporary discussions about academic freedom. Having analysed and criticised "expansive" justifications of academic freedom, linking it to the common good, democratic citizenship, abstract notions of critique, or revolutionary social justice, the American neopragmatist devotes chapter two, entitled "The 'It's Just a Job' school:

professionalism, pure and simple",[18] to articulating his own preferred model. This model, characterized by Fish himself as "deflationary",[19] seeks to ground academic freedom not in transcendent values or external justifications, but only within the immanent logic and specific, limited purposes of the academic profession itself. Understanding this conception is essential for grasping the core of Fish's argument throughout the book and the force of his critique of alternative views.

At the heart of the "It's Just a Job" school lies a specific definition of the academic enterprise. Higher education, Fish insists, should not be mistaken for a "vocation or holy calling",[20] connected with broad moral or political missions. It is, rather, a specific professional service: its designated task is "the advancement of knowledge and the search for truth"[21] within established disciplinary frameworks. This task is understood strictly in academic terms, not political or broadly social ones. The academic cannot educate citizens, inculcate moral values, or train soldiers to fight for social justice. These may be byproducts, but they are not the defining purpose of the job.

This task-oriented definition is grounded, Fish explains, in the logic of professionalism itself, understood as a specific mode of organizing expert labour. Fish emphasises the guild-like nature of academia. A successful profession establishes a monopoly over a specific domain of knowledge or service, develops internal mechanisms for training and credentialing practitioners, and, crucially, insists on its autonomy in defining its own standards of competence and policing its own ranks.[22]

To justify this professional autonomy and the specific content of the academic job, Fish makes a crucial philosophical move, aligning himself with the anti-foundationalist neopragmatism of Richard Rorty and the legal formalism (understood as immanent rationality) of Ernest Weinrib.[23] Following Rorty, Fish argues that academic practices do not require philosophical presuppositions about objective Truth or Reality. Academics

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 20.

[19] *Ibidem*.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 10. See also: "The academy is the place where knowledge is advanced, where the truth about matters physical, conceptual, and social is sought. That's the job, and that's also the aspirational norm: the advancement of knowledge and the search for truth. The values of advancing knowledge and discovering truth are not extrinsic to academic activity; they constitute it. They are the 'internal goods' the 'shared pursuit' of which holds the community together as its members strive for the 'satisfaction of authoring first-rate literary criticism or an outstanding ethnography or an elegant mathematical paper' (…) These goods and values are also self-justifying in the sense that no higher, supervening, authority undergirds them; they themselves undergird and direct the job and serve as a regulative ideal in relation to which current ways of doing things can be assessed and perhaps reformed", pp. 131–132.

[22] "Academic freedom, in this picture, is a subset not of morality or philosophy, but of professionalism…" *Ibidem*, p. 20.

[23] Fish relies on Weinrib's "immanent intelligibility" and Rorty's anti-foundationalism about practice. S. Fish, *Versions of academic freedom*…, pp. 21–28. See: E. Weinrib, *Legal formalism: On the immanent rationality of law*, "Yale Law Journal" 1988, vol. 97, no. 6, pp. 949–1016; R. Rorty, *Does academic freedom have philosophical presuppositions?*, "Academe", Nov.–Dec. 1994, vol. 80, no. 6, pp. 52–63.

follow disciplinary methods, seeking evidence, striving for accuracy, testing hypotheses – not because they subscribe to a particular epistemology, but because "that is what historians [or physicists, or literary critics – added by JŁ] do".[24] These methods are learned through training and participation in the practice; they are products of practices rather than foundations for practices.[25] Academics don't need a theory of truth to try to get the facts right within a discipline; one simply follows the established professional norms for specific disciplinary inquiry.

Building on Weinrib's concept of "immanent intelligibility", Fish argues that any practice, including academic inquiry, can only be understood and justified based on its internal coherence and purpose. To evaluate academic work using external criteria (e.g., its contribution to economic growth, social justice, or democratic competence) is fundamentally misguided for Fish (following Weinrib). The practice is treated not as what it is, but as an instrument for achieving goals external to it, which distorts its internal logic and makes many of its specific features inexplicable or irrational. Justification must be circular in a specific, virtuous sense. The practice is justified by its fidelity to its own defining purpose, and that purpose is understood through the practice itself.[26] Any attempt at a non-circular, external justification leads either to infinite regress or to dissolving the practice into something else.

This rigorous separation of "the academic" from "the non-academic" (especially *the political*) is operationalized through the imperative of "academicizing". Drawing explicitly on Max Weber's distinction in *Science as a Vocation* between the scholar's analysis and the politician's advocacy, Fish insists that when potentially political or controversial topics are brought into the classroom or research, they must be treated as objects of analysis, not occasions for taking partisan stands. An academic analyses different political positions, historical events, or social phenomena using disciplinary tools, aiming for understanding and critical assessment according to academic criteria (coherence, evidence, methodological rigour), rather than aiming to persuade students or colleagues to adopt a particular political viewpoint. Fish explicitly rejects appeals to "neutrality" or "balance" as misguided attempts to manage politics within the classroom. Neutrality is impossible, and balance simply imports external political categories instead of adhering to internal academic standards of relevance and merit. The goal is not political neutrality, but academic integrity, achieved by bracketing partisan commitments while engaged in the professional task.[27]

Now I will directly reconstruct and analyse Fish's core definition of academic freedom within the "It's Just a Job" school. It is the freedom required to perform the specific academic tasks of research and teaching according to the standards of professional correctness, insulated from illegitimate external (political, religious, economic, etc.)

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[24] S. Fish, *Versions of academic freedom*…, p. 22.
[25] *Ibidem*, pp. 26–28.
[26] *Ibidem*, pp. 24–25.
[27] *Ibidem*, pp. 31–34, using Weber's distinction.

pressures that would seek to distort those tasks for non-academic ends. It is "freedom for" disciplined inquiry, not "freedom from" discipline. It protects the professional enterprise's integrity, not the individual academic's unlimited "expressive licence".

This professionalist conception sharply delineates the scope of protected activity. It protects competent, relevant academic work, however controversial its findings might be to outsiders. It does not protect incompetence, misconduct, irrelevance, or the appropriation of the academic platform for purely partisan political advocacy. The crucial arbiter of these distinctions is not an external body or an abstract principle, but the professional academic community itself, said community operating through its established procedures.[28]

Even at this exposition stage, the potential problems and limitations, which will be explored more critically later in my paper, begin to surface. Does this "deflationary" account adequately capture academics' complex social roles, or the aspirations many academics hold? Can the line between "academic analysis" and "political advocacy" truly be drawn so clearly, especially in the humanities and social sciences, which deal with inherently contested concepts?[29] Does reliance on internal professional judgement sufficiently guard against conservatism, exclusion, and the abuse of power within the academic community itself?[30] And can the academic "job" truly be insulated from the turbulent political and cultural contexts (culture wars) in which it is inevitably embedded? While Fish provides a powerful and coherent argumentation based on professionalism, its adequacy to the messy realities of contemporary academic life remains an important question for me in this analysis. Having reconstructed Fish's preferred model, now I turn in section three to his critique of the alternative "versions" of academic freedom.

3. Closing the university gates: Fish's critique of alternative justifications for academic freedom

The persuasive force of Stanley Fish's argument for academic freedom as professional correctness stems mainly from his systematic dismantling of what he presents as the major alternative justifications for academic freedom prevalent in contemporary

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 20.

[29] See Fish's detailed analysis of the William Robinson case in *Versions of academic freedom*…, pp. 17–19, concluding Robinson acted as a political agent, not an academic. "Professor Robinson's e-mail was something else, not a contribution to scholarly inquiry, but a bypassing of scholarly inquiry in favor of the political agenda to which he was committed. Robinson begins his speech by declaring that 'Academic freedom is under attack at the University of California', and throughout he inveighs against a 'patent (…) and politicized violation of academic freedom.' Politicizing the classroom is what he did when he sent the e-mail, and if the offended students politicized in turn, they were shown the way by their professor. If there was an attack on academic freedom at U.C. Santa Barbara, it was his", p. 18.

[30] *Ibidem*, pp. 28–29, directly countering the fear that anti-foundationalism leaves practice unconstrained by arguing constraints are internal disciplinary protocols.

discourse. Having established his own "practice-immanent" model, Fish proceeds in subsequent chapters to demonstrate the model's superiority primarily by exposing the conceptual incoherence and practical vices of conceptions that seek to ground academic freedom in broader, external values, such as the common good, democratic principles, abstract critique, or revolutionary justice. Those critical, rhetorically engaging arguments form the core of *Versions* and reveal the consistency with which Fish applies his anti-foundationalist and neopragmatist principles to reject any justification that strays from the specific, delimited purposes of the academic job itself.[31]

Fish first targets the "For the Common Good" school,[32] which he traces back to the influential "1915 AAUP *Declaration of Principles*" (American Association of University Professors). He acknowledges that this tradition shares with his own view an emphasis on the distinctiveness of the academic task and the need for professional standards. However, he identifies a crucial, and – in his view – fatal, flaw: the tendency to justify academic freedom not by its internal necessity for disciplined inquiry, but by its alleged contribution to external societal goods, most prominently – democracy. Fish analyses arguments, mainly those proposed by Robert Post, that link academic freedom to the production of expertise necessary for "democratic competence". While conceding that academic knowledge "may contingently" benefit democracy, Fish directly rejects the notion that aiding democracy is the defining purpose or primary justification for academic freedom.[33]

His critique here rests firmly on the abovementioned "immanent intelligibility" principle borrowed from Ernest Weinrib. To justify academic freedom based on its service to democracy is, for Fish, to make the academic enterprise instrumental to an external goal, thereby distorting its internal logic and specific virtues (the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, adherence to disciplinary rigour).[34] It changes the fundamental question from "Is this good academic work?" to "Is this good for democracy?" – a question that, according to Fish, academics are neither uniquely qualified nor professionally obligated to answer.[35]

Furthermore, Fish argues, the connection between academic work and democracy is problematic; democracy has many sources of knowledge and competence besides academia, and academic work can flourish even in non-democratic regimes as long as

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[31] *Ibidem*, chapters 3, 4, 5, 6.

[32] *Ibidem*, chapter 3.

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 48.

[34] *Ibidem*, p. 48: "academics do not set out to aid democracy or help build the economy or produce good citizens; these things may contingently happen, but achieving them is not the point. The point is to go down intellectual paths wherever they lead, to challenge received wisdom, to confer analytical skills, to build systems of analysis, to formulate and test hypotheses. In the course of doing all these things, desirable unintended consequences may ensue, but they cannot be cited as the justification of an activity that did not have them in contemplation."

[35] *Ibidem*, p. 48. This echoes Fish's broader argument against seeking external validation for practices in *Doing what comes naturally*.

its internal processes are respected. Tying academic freedom to democracy, paradoxically weakens its defence by making it dependent on demonstrating a contribution to an external, highly contested political project, rather than grounding it firmly in the specific, defensible requirements of the academic job.[36]

Implicitly criticised alongside the "For the Common Good" school is what Fish identifies as the "Academic Exceptionalism" school.[37] This is the view that academics, due to their special intellectual or moral virtues or their crucial societal role, deserve unique privileges and exemptions that other citizens or employees are not granted. Fish consistently rejects this notion. While acknowledging that the nature of academic duties (research, teaching) differs from other jobs and requires specific freedoms (which his professionalist model provides), he denies that this difference translates into a constitutionally distinct status or a general right to insulation from institutional accountability. The claim to exceptionalism, for Fish, is an unjustified inflation of professional privilege into a quasi-aristocratic claim, further undermined by its reliance on external justifications (like serving democracy) that he finds suspect.

However, the sharpest polemics in *Versions* are reserved for the schools Fish perceives as emerging from the political left, which seek to harness the university for explicitly critical or transformative purposes: the "Academic Freedom as Critique"[38] school and the "Academic Freedom as Revolution" school.[39] Fish presents arguments primarily against Judith Butler's views as a representative of the "Critique". He acknowledges Butler's poststructuralist insight that disciplinary norms are historically contingent conventions, not timeless truths. However, he fundamentally disagrees with her conclusion that academic freedom must therefore include the freedom to radically critique and transgress those very norms from a standpoint "outside" the established modes of intelligibility.[40]

Fish's counter-argument again relies on the logic of practice and community. While norms are conventional and revisable, meaningful critique and change can only occur from within the practice, using arguments and standards intelligible to the relevant community. For Fish, to try to engage in critique from a "rogue viewpoint" outside all disciplinary constraints either is incoherent (since even critique needs a framework) or simply amounts to abandoning the academic game for another game (e.g., political activism).[41]

He rejects Butler's blurring of the line between academic work and political work, insisting that maintaining this distinction, however "artificial" or "politically constructed"

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36 S. Fish, *Versions of academic freedom*…, pp. 40–44. Fish is highly skeptical of claims that specific governance models are essential for good academic work.

37 *Ibidem*, chapter 5, pp. 74–103.

38 *Ibidem*, pp. 50–73.

39 *Ibidem*, pp. 104–128.

40 *Ibidem*, pp. 54–55, 59–60, 66. Fish insists that critique must operate within recognized disciplinary norms to be intelligible and meaningful as 'academic".

41 *Ibidem*, p. 64.

it may seem, is constitutive of the academic enterprise. To define academic freedom as the freedom to prioritize political critique over disciplinary protocols is, for Fish, to dissolve the very identity of academia.[42] His analysis of Butler's examples consistently aims to show that political engagement undertaken in academia cannot claim the specific protections of academic freedom.

The "Revolution" school, exemplified by Denis Rancourt's "academic squatting" and Henry Giroux's critical pedagogy, represents for Fish the logical, if extreme, endpoint of abandoning professionalism. Here, the university is explicitly viewed as a site of political struggle and an instrument for direct social transformation. Academic freedom becomes synonymous with the obligation to fight injustice, even if it requires violating institutional rules, course descriptions, or traditional pedagogical norms. Fish analyses this position with undisguised scorn, as a complete betrayal of the academic mission. He analyses the arguments for the boycott of Israeli universities as a prime example of this logic, where proponents explicitly subordinate academic values (like free exchange with colleagues regardless of nationality) to political commitments.[43]

While acknowledging the moral force of the political concerns, Fish insists that acting on them within the academic role by violating professional norms constitutes a fundamental mistake – mistaking the university for a political action committee. He argues that this expansive, politicized view ultimately destroys the very academic freedom it purports to uphold, by erasing the distinctions that give "academic" its specific meaning.

Underlying Fish's critique of all these alternative schools is a consistent antifoundationalist conventionalism coupled with a strong defence of practice-internal justification. He rejects any attempt to ground academic freedom in anything outside the academic enterprise itself – whether it be universal human rights, democratic principles, the demands of critique, or the imperatives of social justice. His preferred "It's Just a Job" model, by contrast, seeks justification solely within the immanent rationality of the professional academic task itself – the disciplined pursuit of knowledge according to community-validated standards.

This systematic critique clears the path for Fish's affirmation of the professionalist model as the only viable option. However, it simultaneously highlights the limitations of his own position. By bracketing out broader political and ethical concerns as "external" to the academic job, does Fish adequately address the university's complex relationship with society? Can professional standards truly be insulated from the culture wars raging outside and inside campus walls? And what resources does his model offer when the professional community itself is deeply divided over its fundamental goals and norms? These critical questions, largely unaddressed by Fish's focused critique of alternatives in *Versions*, point towards the need for further analysis, which will

42 *Ibidem*, pp. 61–63, 68–71.

43 *Ibidem*, pp. 104–128.

be undertaken in the subsequent section of my paper. Having examined Fish's attack on rival conceptions, I will now return to a closer assessment of the strengths, weaknesses, and adequacy of the professionalist bastion he seeks to defend.

4. Between the classroom, the library and the streets: The limits of Fish's professionalism

Having criticized principle-based foundations upon which traditional defences of academic freedom typically rest, Stanley Fish does not succumb to mere critique or deconstructive despair in *Versions*. Instead, true to his unwavering neopragmatist and anti-foundationalist commitments, he relocates the grounding of academic freedom entirely, shifting it away from the universalist aspirations of rights discourse towards the academic enterprise's particular, situated, and purposive practices, understood as a distinct interpretive community with its own immanent logic and standards.

This internal justification finds its substance in the notion of professionalism. Academia, like law or medicine, functions as a professional guild, establishing its own standards for entry, competence, and conduct. The content of these standards constitutes "professional correctness": it is the mastery of the discipline's existing knowledge base, proficiency in its accepted methodologies, adherence to its evidentiary protocols, competence in its specific forms of argument and rhetoric, and observance of its ethical norms (such as prohibitions against plagiarism or data fabrication).

The crucial implication, drawn out by Fish throughout *Versions*, is that academic freedom offers no protection whatsoever against judgements based on internal professional standards. Peer review rejecting an article for methodological flaws, a department denying tenure for insufficient scholarly contribution, or a university dismissing a faculty member for demonstrably incompetent teaching or research misconduct – these are not violations of academic freedom but legitimate exercises of professional self-regulation, necessary for maintaining the integrity of the academic enterprise. Academic freedom protects from external interference, not from internal professional judgement. Fish quotes approvingly Alasdair MacIntyre's point that one cannot be initiated into a practice "without accepting the authority of the best standards realized so far".[44] While those standards can be challenged and evolve, the challenge must itself be mounted using arguments recognizable as competent within the existing professional framework.

This model gives us, academics, a clear, although controversial, tool for addressing contemporary campus speech controversies, often fuelled by culture wars. Fish's primary diagnostic tool is the distinction between academically relevant speech/conduct (pertaining to the professional tasks of research and teaching, judged by internal

[44] *Ibidem*, p. 63.

standards) and non-academic speech/conduct (personal opinions, political activism, disruptions unrelated to disciplined inquiry).

Speech falling into the first category, even if offensive or challenging to external interpretive communities, is protected by academic freedom if deemed professionally competent. Fish would likely defend, for instance, rigorous scholarly critique of political figures, religious doctrines, or social structures, provided it adheres to disciplinary norms of evidence and argument, regardless of external outcry.[45] The university must defend the professional judgement of its faculty against political pressure. Speech falling into the second category – personal political diatribes unrelated to course content, demonstrable incompetence, harassment, or actions designed primarily to disrupt the academic functioning of the university – receives no special protection under the banner of academic freedom. Individuals engaging in such speech may have rights as citizens but cannot claim academic privilege when acting outside their professional role or competence. This distinction is sharp and, for Fish, essential. Again, the relevant professional community is the ultimate arbiter in applying these distinctions. As noted previously, the reliance on the professional community as the locus of standards and judgement exposes the model to significant criticism.

Critics argue that professional communities can be insular, self-serving, and prone to enforcing orthodoxy, potentially using "professional correctness" to marginalize inconvenient truths or challenging perspectives, especially those emerging from marginalized groups. Fish is aware of these dangers but seems largely untroubled by them, placing his faith in the long-term, internal dynamics of disciplinary debate, and the assumed commitment of professionals to the internal goods of their practice (truth, rigour, evidence, coherence). His model offers few resources for challenging the community's judgement from the outside or for situations where the community itself is deeply fractured over its core standards – a situation arguably characteristic of many fields affected by the culture wars.

Furthermore, the model's insistence on sharp boundaries between "the academic" and "the political" seems increasingly difficult to maintain in practice. Can academic work on systemic racism, climate change, or economic inequality truly be conducted without engaging political values and consequences? Fish's imperative to "academicize" political topics risks sterilizing inquiry or creating an artificial detachment from the real-world implications that often motivate academic work in the social sciences and humanities. His conception struggles to accommodate the growing demand for publicly engaged scholarship or to recognize the ways in which external political forces inevitably shape internal academic debates and standards. From many different critical perspectives, the "Ivory Tower" he defends seems both empirically porous and normatively undesirable.

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45 *Ibidem*, pp. 117–119; *cf.* what Fish writes about public intellectuals here.

Despite these weak aspects of the "professional" conception, the reconstruction of academic freedom presented in *Versions* remains a formidable theoretical achievement. By consistently applying his anti-foundationalist principles and his theory of interpretive communities, Fish constructs a coherent, practice-based alternative to liberal rights discourse. His model of freedom as professional correctness, while deliberately "deflationary" and potentially conservative in its implications, forces a crucial clarification of the specific purposes and inherent constraints of the academic enterprise. It challenges academics to justify their claims to freedom based on the demonstrable rigour and relevance of their professional practice, rather than on appeals to universal rights they may share with all citizens, but which do not capture the specific nature of their work.

Fish's focus on the internal logic of the "academic game" serves as a powerful antidote to attempts to instrumentalize the university for immediate political ends, whether from the left or the right. His work is a stark reminder that academic freedom, if it is to mean anything distinct, must be tied to the specific, disciplined pursuit of knowledge characteristic of academic professions. While I am arguing that Fish's model is ultimately too narrow and normatively thin to fully address the complexities of contemporary academic life, the rigorous, unsentimental, and practice-focused analysis provided in *Versions* makes it an indispensable, although deeply unsettling, contribution to the ongoing struggle over the meaning and future of academic freedom.

5. Feeling safe in the seminar room? The inadequacy of Fish's academic freedom on the tightropes of culture wars

Stanley Fish's *Versions* delivers precisely what readers familiar with his work would expect: a rhetorically dazzling, intellectually bracing, and relentlessly polemical argument that challenges deeply held assumptions and forces a fundamental rethinking of its subject-matter. As my paper argued, Fish masterfully deploys his signature anti-foundationalist and neopragmatist framework to deconstruct traditional justifications for academic freedom, ultimately advocating for a starkly deflationary alternative, grounded in the immanent logic of professional correctness.

His central thesis – that academic freedom is simply the freedom, and obligation, to "do the job" according to the internally defined standards of the academic enterprise, insulated from external political or moral agendas – possesses an unquestionable coherence. By meticulously analysing various "versions" of academic freedom and exposing their reliance on what he considers untenable abstractions, Fish clears the conceptual space for his preferred professionalist model, presenting it as the only viable defence in a world stripped of universal guarantees.

The strength of Fish's contribution in *Versions* lies in its diagnostic clarity and its unflinching realism about the nature of specialized practices. His insistence on analysing

academic freedom within the specific context and stated purposes of the university, rather than deriving it from general political rights, provides a crucial corrective to overly broad or idealized conceptions. Furthermore, his emphasis on professionalism offers a potentially robust defence against external political interference by grounding academic autonomy in expertise and specific institutional goals, rather than universally contestable rights. In an era where universities face increasing political scrutiny and pressure, Fish's argument for professional self-governance based on internal standards holds undeniable appeal.

However, when evaluating Fish's model not just for its internal consistency but for its adequacy in addressing the complex realities of academic life, particularly amidst the intensifying culture wars, significant limitations and problematic implications emerge – limitations illuminated by the very theoretical assumptions that underpin Fish's own analysis.

Firstly, Fish's heavy reliance on the "professional community" as the sole arbiter of "correctness" appears increasingly strained in highly polarized academic environments. The culture wars are often characterized precisely by deep disagreements within disciplines about fundamental methodologies, objects of study, ethical responsibilities, and the very definition of the academic mission. When the professional community itself is fractured into competing interpretive factions (resonating with Fish's own core theory of interpretive communities), appealing to "the community's standards" becomes deeply problematic if not downright impossible.

Whose standards? Which faction represents *the* profession? Fish's model, while adept at defending a cohesive profession against external threats, offers little guidance for addressing internal fragmentation and contests over the very definition of the "game" he champions. His faith in the internal dynamics of professional debate may underestimate the degree to which these internal conflicts are driven by broader political antagonisms that cannot be resolved by simply appealing to existing professional norms.

Secondly, the sharp boundary Fish draws between the academic and the political/ethical seems empirically questionable and normatively unsatisfying. While his critique of directly instrumentalizing the classroom for partisan politics is salutary, his attempt to bracket out all broader social or ethical concerns from the definition of professional correctness appears increasingly problematic. Can teaching literature be separated from ethical questions about representation and power? Can legal scholarship ignore issues of social justice? Poststructuralist insights into the intertwining of knowledge and power and the ubiquity of *the political* suggest that such neat separations are illusory.

By insisting on a "glorious narrowness", Fish risks rendering academic work sterile and irrelevant to the pressing issues that motivate many scholars and students, potentially justifying the very external critiques of academic insularity he otherwise resists.

His model struggles to account for the legitimacy of publicly engaged scholarship or the ethical responsibilities that might arise from possessing specialized knowledge.[46]

Thirdly, Fish's reliance on the professional community raises persistent concerns about power, exclusion, and conservatism. As critics have long pointed out, professional communities are not neutral meritocracies; they have hierarchies, biases, and mechanisms for enforcing conformity and marginalizing dissent. In practice, "professional correctness" can easily become a tool for maintaining the status quo and silencing voices that challenge dominant paradigms, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, whose perspectives might not align with established disciplinary norms. Fish's views lack robust resources for critiquing power dynamics within the community or for justifying radical innovation that genuinely breaks with existing conventions. His model might inadvertently serve to legitimize the very forms of institutional exclusion that critical theories seek to expose.

Where does this leave us in thinking about academic freedom amidst the culture wars? Fish's *Versions* serves as an indispensable provocation and an analytical tool. It forces us to abandon naive liberal foundationalism and take the conventional, situated, and purposive nature of academic practice seriously. It correctly identifies the dangers of subordinating academic inquiry to immediate political agendas. Its defence of professional autonomy against external interference remains valuable. However, its own proposed solution appears insufficiently equipped to handle the deep internal divisions, the complex interplay of knowledge and power, and the pressing ethical and political questions that characterize contemporary academic life.

Ultimately, Stanley Fish's *Versions* is a vital, if unsettling, contribution to a debate that admits no easy answers. It exemplifies the intellectual power of his neopragmatist epistemology and its capacity to deconstruct cherished illusions. Its insistence on professionalism provides a necessary anchor against purely political instrumentalization. Nevertheless, its limitations – particularly its bracketing of deeper political or ethical conflicts and its potentially conservative implications – highlight the need to move beyond its confines.

Fighting challenges to academic freedom today requires the realism about practice championed by Fish, but also a normative vision and critical capacity that his strictly professionalist model cannot fully supply. The "academic game" is, as Fish demonstrates, governed by internal rules, but understanding and potentially transforming that game requires acknowledging its entanglement with the larger, messier, and inescapably political world beyond academia's self-drawn boundaries. Fish forces us onto the tightrope of post-foundational thought. Finding our balance requires resources drawn from, but also extending beyond, his provocative map.

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[46] *Ibidem*, p. 117: "All I would say is that if we are going to have an academy we should really have it in all its glorious narrowness and not transform it into an appendage of politics, even when – no, especially when – the politics is one we affirm and believe in with all our hearts."

So, Fish has us – academics – on the tightrope, and it is a fine rope, tautly strung by his own conceptions and expectations. "Just walk,", he seems to advise us from the safety of the established and recognised scholar platform. "It's a job. Eyes forward. One professional foot in front of the other. Do not look down, and for God's sake, don't try to dance." Yet, as we take our tentative steps, the promised stability of Fish's construction seems to waver. The crowd below is not merely observing our technique; they are shouting instructions, some even seem to be shaking the poles that anchor our rope. To simply "do the job" under these conditions feels less like professional composure and more like a wilful, perhaps even perilous, obliviousness.

In the end, Fish leaves us not with a manifesto but a tightrope and no safety net. The academic, he insists, must learn to walk it: to speak authoritatively yet without claiming universal authority, to defend a practice without resorting to principles that transcend it. In Fish's neopragmatist terms, it is the only intellectually honest position left after the collapse of foundational guarantees and safety nets. But the tightrope is fraying. The winds of politics are gusting through the seminar room, shaking the lines once assumed secure. If there is any freedom left in that act, it is neither heroic nor emancipatory; and in a world where everyone claims the moral and political high ground, perhaps staying balanced – just barely – may be the most radical act of all.

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Abstract

Jakub Łakomy

The Professor, the Political Activist, and the Professional on the Tightropes of Culture Wars: Stanley Fish's *Versions of Academic Freedom*

Today, academic freedom is increasingly contested amid intensifying culture wars and political polarisation, both within and beyond university walls. Traditional liberal and critical defences of academic freedom—grounded in universal rights, public good, or transformative critique – appear conceptually fragile and normatively overstretched. This paper reconstructs and critically evaluates Stanley Fish's deflationary and professionalist conception of academic freedom, as developed in *Versions of Academic Freedom*. Drawing on Fish's neopragmatist and anti-foundationalist framework, the paper argues that academic freedom cannot be defended by appealing to abstract ideals or external social functions, but only by reference to the immanent logic of disciplinary practice. Fish's model posits that academic freedom is the limited freedom to perform professional tasks – teaching and research – according to internal standards of scholarly rigour, not a licence for personal expression or political activism. While his approach offers a coherent and context-sensitive alternative to foundationalist accounts, the paper argues that it is insufficient to address the ethical and political challenges of contemporary academia. The paper proposes that defending academic freedom today requires both Fish's realism about professional constraints and a critical awareness of the political forces shaping knowledge production – an uncomfortable balancing act on the tightrope of post-foundational thought.

Keywords: academic freedom, professionalism, neopragmatism