Beyond Neutrality

The university's responsibility to lead

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Last year, two university presidents lost their jobs because, when testifying before Congress, they failed to project authority and moral seriousness to the general public; a third resigned this summer. This tells us something about what a university president is today. Being judged a leader by those whom you are not employed to lead is, apparently, part of the job description—especially at universities such as Harvard, MIT and the University of Pennsylvania. Six months later, Lawrence D. Bobo, dean of Harvard's Division of Social Science, called for the faculty to stop publicly criticizing the university—or else face sanction. Harvard faculty recoiled at the prospect of having their freedom of expression curtailed, but Bobo's demand for a united front—or at least the appearance of one—testifies to the political significance that Harvard has, and aims to continue to have.

Campus protests, such as those that erupted across the country this year following Israel's invasion of Gaza, threaten the university's desired self-presentation. When protesters bait the university into using violence against them, they are trying to expose it to the world as the opposite of the noble leader it purports to be: an ignorant, selfish brute. Even if the conflict is resolved without violence, the university is unlikely to come off well. The president must either bow to the protesters' demands, or refuse. From an onlooker's vantage point, the difference between a conciliatory act of restoring peace and a resolute act of enforcing discipline is small: either way, the president is tending to the people who are screaming, not the people they are screaming about. A university that is turned inward during a time of crisis will struggle to project leadership to the world outside it.

Protest exposes a tension between the university's intellectual mission and its political ambitions. I want to explain why this tension exists, to offer some constructive criticisms of my own university's attempts at negotiating it—both in general, and with respect to the recent protests in particular—and, finally, to make a suggestion as to how universities might rethink their position of leadership.

Universities were born prematurely. Let me explain what I mean by this. A university is a place devoted to the problem of how to make serious use of free time. This problem only arises once your other problems—of how to stay alive, and support the people around you—have been solved. In a university, we ask, "What pursuits would we see as worthy of sustained effort in a world of justice, peace and plenty?"; our answers are "math" and "philosophy" and "anthropology" and so on. But we do not yet inhabit a world of justice, peace and plenty.

Forced to find a place for itself in a world unfriendly to sheltered gardens, the university employs police, hedge-fund managers, construction companies, a fundraising office and PR teams. It is ever selling itself to prospective students and their parents as a vehicle for success, ever competing for status with other universities and other institutions, ever struggling to placate its many constituencies—not only students and

faculty but also its board of trustees, its present and future donors, the media, the government. Does it tell all these people that it is a leisured garden? No. Does it confess: We're just selfishly trying to keep our financial heads above water in a competitive world of scarce resources? Also no. The image the university has chosen for itself is that of *moral leader*. It presents itself as a force for positive change, a beacon of useful innovation, a bastion of social responsibility, a bulwark of democracy, a meritocratic temple to equality and freedom and justice. The homepage of my university advertises both its "community impact" and "global impact," and claims "we advance ideas and humanity."

The university could respond to protesters by declaring, "This has nothing to do with us, we're just an ivory tower." Or it could put on its worldly hat and admit, "Taking sides does not maximize the value of our investments." Instead it reacts in a spirit of self-righteousness, waving some competing moral slogan. The University of Chicago, which has for the past decade been rebranding itself as the free-speech university, waves the flag of academic freedom and institutional neutrality. After forcibly removing the encampment, UChicago's president, Paul Alivisatos, wrote an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* explaining his action: the protesters wanted him to side against Israel, but he believed that doing so would inhibit the freedom of its students and faculty to declare themselves on the opposite side. And yet he did not worry that by declaring the university on the side of institutional neutrality, he would be inhibiting the freedom of those in the university community who wish to call that principle into question—a group that includes, presumably, all of the protesters. As my colleague, the philosopher Anton Ford, has noted, UChicago's rebrand as *the* free-speech university was a top-down operation, not the product of consultation with students or faculty.

The question then is: Why say anything at all? If the university believes its public position-taking inhibits my freedom, why take any positions? The answer is that the university is not in the business of maximizing my freedom, it is in the position of maximizing my freedom consistent with presenting itself as a moral leader. It is willing to impose costs on my freedom of expression in order to present itself as something other than a moneymaking leisure garden.

It is hard to know how many people really accept the university as a moral leader. Even those who donate on the strength of the free-speech branding might do so for strategic reasons—for instance, because they interpret such support, in the current climate, as a coded way of attacking the far left. It is the idealistic protesters who reveal themselves as true believers: their furious demand to be heard—assembling on campus and protesting in front of the administration building, rather than at the dentist's office, or at the headquarters of Amazon, or at a government building—is a direct acknowledgment of the administration's claim to moral and intellectual leadership. Their behavior telegraphs an accusation: "If you were who you claimed to be, you would listen to us."

Elite universities have been the site of the largest protests. This fact has been levied scornfully against the protesters, as if it proved the illegitimacy of their cause.

But really all it proves is that the leading universities are also the ones that make the greatest claims to lead the world.

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The university is far from the only institution with moral pretensions. It has no monopoly on weakly substantiated claims to leadership. There is an intense pressure on anyone with any power—no matter how local—to engage in moralistic foot stomping: when you're classified among the "elite," the world demands showy displays of the moral knowledge you don't have, and when those world elites are divided among themselves, the demand becomes a requirement to pick a side. One strategy for retaining a claim to leadership while holding oneself above the fray is to stomp one's feet on more abstract ground. The president of the University of Chicago justifies withdrawing from one war by claiming that he is busy fighting another, namely, the war to "uphold the university's principles and resist the forces tearing at the fabric of higher education." It is not clear, to me, what forces and principles he is talking about. The university's neutrality, for instance, seems more selective than principled: American universities took far less care to avoid siding with Ukraine against Russia than with the Palestinians against Israel.

When I think about what could possibly ground any university's claim to moral leadership—where its supposed moral wisdom might lie—I don't find the answer in any one of its divisions, departments or programs. Why would a community of mathematicians and historians and literature professors add up to something morally special, by contrast with a community with fewer Ph.D.s? Though each of its professors can claim expertise in the discipline she practices, and the people it pays to manage its financial assets or construct its buildings are presumably experts at those things, none of that translates into *moral* expertise. If we are to take pride in the wisdom of the university as a whole, that can only be because an intellectual community fosters a morally distinctive kind of interaction.

I propose instead: a university is special to the extent that it is a place where teaching and learning replace fighting and grandstanding. Outside the university, elite moralists are given to insisting that this or that must be done, because claims to certainty serve as a signaling device: "I know what we should do" means "I deserve to be counted among the leading lights." Here at the university, we usually try to use the word "know" more literally. Knowledge entails proof, which is to say, being able to demonstrate and teach what you claim to know. If you are stuck fighting people you disagree with, that shows that neither of you has knowledge—at least in the context of an intellectual community, where there is no need to fight, because the ignorant are willing to learn, and the knowers are willing to teach.

The protesters believe that they are entitled, by the justice of their cause, to ignore and disrupt the university's normal pursuit of its mission. The university believes it is entitled, by its own principles, to resist this disruption. Each side uses force to get what it wants, and the details of these disruptions—exactly how much force is permitted, by

which party, and when—are hotly disputed by the media as well as on campus. And yet the real scandal lies in all the ways in which this disgracefully anti-intellectual debacle gets normalized and gilded. When we use force to manage our disagreements, we are admitting that this place is nowhere special, that the ethos of the classroom cannot be the ethos of the university as a whole. There is no deeper insult to an intellectual community than the suggestion that, when its conversations drift onto a topic that really matters—when, as the saying goes, "push comes to shove"—they have to stop talking and start pushing and shoving.

Alivisatos wrote of his conversation with the protesters, "As the depth of this philosophical difference became clearer, I decided to end the dialogue." As a philosopher, I find this statement hard to understand: if the ethos of the classroom were the ethos of the university, philosophical conversation would be the only way to resolve a philosophical difference. The real dialogue is the one that begins when you reach a deep philosophical difference, and the university is precisely the place for such dialogues. What could possibly be so important as to justify cutting one off? I can think of only one candidate: the dialogue itself. Sometimes the best way to pursue a disagreement is to postpone it. Even Socrates was prepared to walk away from conversations, if they seemed to be devolving into insults or long speeches—but he made it clear that he was walking away for the sake of conversation itself, so as to find a better way to pursue it in the future. Alivisatos could have had the same attitude—regretful postponement—in relation to his philosophical disagreement with the protesters over the question of institutional neutrality. Instead, he stomped his feet: "there is no way I would ever compromise on institutional neutrality." Why not? The only argument Alivisatos gives for his position is that "if the university did so [i.e. engaged in advocacy] as an institution, it would no longer be much of a university." I imagine that the protesters might be willing to bite this bullet: *Then let the university stop being a university! Let it become something better instead!* What is Alivisatos's next move?

I am happy to defer to Alivisatos's judgment that his conversation with the protesters had stalled, and that the time had come to enforce the rules of the university; I would have been equally ready to defer to the judgment that he ought to try to accommodate some of the protesters' demands. I am not a university president, and unlike many commentators on the protests, I do not moonlight as one either. But I am a philosopher, and when it comes to the "deep philosophical difference" that, by his own description, divides Alivisatos from the protesters, I believe that he was mistaken. He characterized neutrality as the "foundational value" of the university, but neutrality is not a value at all. Neutrality may be an improvement over capitulating to the pressure to make moral proclamations in the absence of the corresponding moral knowledge, but that is a low bar. Neutrality describes how you act when you are ignorant on a matter that you, as a leader, really ought to have knowledge about, and you acknowledge this rather than pretending otherwise. Neutrality is not acceptable as a response to injustice, except temporarily. We remain neutral when we do not know what to do, and while we work out how to become the people who do. I would

classify neutrality in the way that Aristotle classifies shame: the half-virtue of the learner. It makes no more sense to pride oneself on being neutral than to pride oneself on feeling ashamed.

One day, I hope to see a confrontation between a university that understands that its neutrality is meant to be broken, that it is neutral *so that* it can listen, and protesters who understand that the way forward lies in the education of their opponents, and that no one can be educated by coercion.

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I have focused so many of my criticisms on my own university administration because it seems to me to have a grasp—however twisted and deformed—of the one form of leadership that would not undermine its intellectual mission. "Neutrality" is a bad way of getting at a good idea, which is that the university leads by learning. If the university must be a leader, let it pioneer inquisitive leadership.

Inquisitive leadership is the kind of leadership a teacher practices in a classroom, and also the kind of leadership a student practices, in the same classroom, when she raises her voice to ask or answer a question. In that context, you might *argue* for a side, but you don't "take a side," in the sense of "standing up for" your "principles" or avowing any "commitments" or "fighting" any "forces." All of these modes of speech proclaim some matter settled when there are people out there who disagree. Inquisitive people are alert to the danger of overclaiming knowledge, and inquisitive contexts are precisely those in which there is no need to do so—neither for the teacher, nor for the student. Declaring yourself ready to fight on a given side is how you project leadership outside the classroom, but inside the classroom leadership works differently: we don't need to fight, because all of us are ready both to teach and learn.

Even inside a university, one cannot assume that everyone is willing to be inquisitive about every topic all of the time—much less so outside it. But where we are not willing to be inquisitive, we have no right to lead.

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This essay appears in a special section in issue 33, "Education and Society." Click here to read the other three essays in the section, by Elisa Gonzalez, Jennie Lightweis-Goff and Joseph M. Keegin.

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