If a man utters a downright lie or commits a daylight robbery or a murder, am I to call this brother of mine, as he most assuredly is, a liar or a thief or a murderer, or am I to use Churchillian language and say “he perambulates round the suburbs of veracity.” Or “he helps himself to the goods that do not belong to him without perhaps any intention of stealing,” or “he spills innocent blood, though perhaps he does not want to kill”? And if I were to use such circumlocutory speech, is there the slightest guarantee that I shall never hurt the party of whom I may be speaking? Harsh truth may be uttered courteously and gently, but the words would read hard. To be truthful you must call a liar a liar—a harsh word perhaps, but the use is inevitable.

—Mahatma Gandhi (346–47)

The notion of academic freedom captures several distinct claims. It asserts that academic peers are best placed to judge scholarly competence and accordingly that on all such professional matters they should be granted autonomy. This component of academic freedom is designed to preempt extrascholarly considerations from tainting employment decisions. Beyond the right to professional autonomy, academic freedom also asserts that pursuit of the life of the mind requires complete liberty of thought. Insofar as the academic community is devoted to the discovery of truth, its mission cannot be realized, as every reader of John Stuart Mill knows, if barriers restrict the mind from meandering down paths of inquiry less traveled. The right of an academic to liberty of thought additionally means that outside the professional setting, scholars should enjoy the ordinary rights of a democratic citizen to speak their minds and accordingly that extramural utterances should not bear on the assessment of professional competence. Historically, the great battles over academic freedom in the United States were fought first to free university life from the hold of clerical bias (sponsored by private denominations, American colleges were originally the “ward of religion”), then economic bias (in particular, corporate interference),¹ and then political bias (the periodic Red Scares climaxing in McCarthyism [Schrecker]).

Even if fully redeemed, academic freedom is not quite so liberating as it might appear prima facie. Insofar as your colleagues decide your competence, you won’t survive very long the academic vetting process if they are of the decided opinion that your speculations, however copiously
documented and compellingly advanced, lack scholarly merit. Ruling the roost, successful academics develop a stake in the intellectual status quo; while in fields that are highly politicized, these academics, most of whom have reconciled with the reigning orthodoxy, reflexively if not quash, at any rate look askance at, dissent. In practice, professional autonomy and liberty of thought mean that, until gaining admittance to the community of arbiters, you can express heretical ideas in the academy so long as your advisors approve your dissertation; so long as refereed journals approve your articles for publication; so long as expert readers for university presses recommend your manuscripts for publication; and so long as once entering the marketplace of ideas your publications are well received among authorities in the field (Menand 9). I do not see how a university could function in the absence of such policing, but it would be unworldly naïve to deny that ego and political agendas often, perhaps more often than not, make a mockery of professional arbitration and free inquiry. Anyone familiar with academic life will attest that the content of a scholarly review commands much less interest in conversation than the base motive lurking behind the reviewer’s praise or skewering of a book. The ultimate consequence of these police functions, which, I repeat, appear to be essential for the maintenance of a standard of professional competence, is that long before a tenure decision is made, most would-be academics have internalized the permissible limits of academic freedom and, consequently, few candidates are denied tenure on explicitly political grounds. Inferring a high degree of tolerance in the ivory tower from the paucity of politicized tenure cases is an optical illusion born of focusing on the final stage of the socialization process; it fails to take account how many aspirants to the life of the mind inconspicuously and incrementally accommodate themselves to the rules of the academic game many years before they come up for tenure, or even land a tenure-track job, and how many fall away from intellectual frustration. One of the exhilarating revelations of my graduate school experience at an elite institution was how many colleagues in my entering class fancied themselves Marxists—truly, The Revolution was imminent if even Princeton was replete with radicals—and one of the sobering revelations how many ceased to be Marxists once going on the job market. Of course, those entering most professional environments perforce surrender their youthful ideals and iconoclastic convictions. What makes academia gallingly hypocritical is the pretense that unlike, say, the business world, it is unbounded, and what you publicly avow you actually believe—although it must be acknowledged that, after a while and to preserve self-regard, academics actually do swear by their opportunistic humbug, becoming “subjectively,” if not “objectively,” free.}

Having said this, it is nonetheless my impression that academia is a relatively free-wheeling place so long as one’s opinions and carryings-on are kept within university confines. Right-wing commentators who declaim against liberal bias in many (if politically the most innocuous) departments of higher education are not far off the mark. If you stick to speaking only at academic conferences, publishing only in academic journals, and being