Philip Tetlock of the University of Pennsylvania was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2025. In this video, Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Prof. Tetlock about why viewpoint diversity is necessary to maintain high intellectual standards, how the implicit deal between society and the university has become harder to maintain, and why public opinion about the university is more complex than we might think.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello everybody, I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences and Letters. I'm speaking today with one of our members, Philip Tetlock of the University of Pennsylvania. Phil, thank you so much for being with us.

Philip Tetlock, University of Pennsylvania

My pleasure.

Forster

What would you say are the one or two biggest challenges right now for maintaining high intellectual standards in your field?

Tetlock

The biggest challenge in the fields of social, political, organizational psychology would be the ideological homogeneity, the groupthink that deters people from entering and deters people who are *in* the field from exploring creative lines of inquiry.

Forster

What would you say is the effect of intellectual homogeneity on intellectual standards? Some people say you can maintain high intellectual standards even if the points of view are all the same, but it sounds like you feel that's not the case.

Tetlock

In principle, that's possible, I suppose, if people were purely logic machines. With Mr. Spock from *Star Trek* you could imagine something like that unfolding, but we're talking about human beings, and human beings are status-seeking primates who very much value their position in hierarchies, and they're going to think several times before they decide to offend people above them in the hierarchy.

Forster

Even before you mentioned *Star Trek*, I immediately thought of the *Star Trek* episode where they encounter beings who are literally brains in jars, but we are not brains in jars.

Tetlock

Well, not yet. We'll see how far AI goes.

Forster

We're not there yet, so we have to recognize that we respond to incentives.

Tetlock

We're very incentive-sensitive.

Forster

Let me ask you my next question. How would you describe the mission of the university, and why is that important?

Tetlock

This is a huge question, and I still haven't quite wrapped my head around it. Universities have played many roles in society through history. The post–World War II, US-centric model of universities has emphasized their role as generators of public-good knowledge, especially advancing science, but providing education to kids. To perform that function in an effective way, universities do have to be able to maintain high meritocratic standards that apply regardless of viewpoint and demographics. They have to be able to be very tolerant of a wide range of views, as long as they're well argued. They have a logical and empirical foundation.

I'm not suggesting there should be a place in universities for the flat earth society or creationist geology or what have you. We have to define what the reasonable range of opinion is within any given discipline at any given moment. That determines how wide the Overton window becomes. The Overton window can't be infinitely wide, but it has narrowed too much, especially over the last 10 years. It didn't feel as restrictive as it does. It feels a little less restrictive now, but there was a peak period between about 2016 and 2024 of group thinking in academia when it did feel unusually oppressive, more oppressive than at any other point in my career. I have a fairly long time to compare it to. I got my PhD in 1979. I started as an assistant professor at Berkeley in 1979. Berkeley has always been at least moderately left leaning, but Berkeley in the early 1980s didn't feel anything like Berkeley in the early 2020s or other Ivy League places.

Forster

It seems to me that you're right, that there's a need for boundaries. The question is not only how loose or strict the boundaries are, but where they come from. Are they determined by the intellectual content of the discipline, or are they being imposed from without for some exogenous ideological purpose?

Tetlock

If I have a philosophy or sociology of science, it owes quite a bit to Robert Merton and his model. He wrote a paper on the norms of science in 1942 in the middle of World War II. He envisioned it as a deal that the scientific community was making with society, which was supporting the scientific community. It was a quid pro quo. The society would infuse money and resources into the scientific infrastructure, and the scientists in turn would maintain a self-correcting epistemic community in which they would apply norms of disinterestedness and impartiality and objectivity, regardless of who is making the claims. They wouldn't bend standards of evidence and proof as a function of whether most scientists find the findings ideologically congenial or uncongenial. Now, that's a hard thing to do. It's been hard for science to uphold its end of the Mertonian bargain. In some ways it's failed, but there are signs that we may be coming back to our collective senses.

Forster

I feel like we're already back to status-seeking primates responding to incentives, as we were before. We're also already talking about my next question: In what ways do you think the public at large has a good understanding of the mission of the university, and in what ways do you think the public at large needs a better understanding than it currently has of the mission of the university?

Tetlock

I find that term "public at large" a little bit underdefined. In an earlier part of my career, I worked with some political scientists who did survey research. "Public at large" needs to be unpacked. There is an educated elite that has a moderately good sense of how universities work. They don't fully appreciate the way they do, otherwise they'd be more reluctant to donate, but they have a reasonable understanding of how universities work. Most public universities are rather distant and remote and only come onto the radar screen when significant things happen, when there are violent demonstrations or whatnot. That does produce some significant backlash among the public at large, but for the most part, when universities are reasonably quiescent, most people in the general public don't have strong views. The educated public, and especially the educated public that is committed to sending its kids to very expensive schools, do pay attention. Virtually all of them have degrees in institutions of higher education, so they're not that naive.

Forster

I saw recent survey research done by Heterodox Academy emphasizing that the public wants contradictory things from universities. It made me think of how, when I studied survey research as a graduate student in political science, one of the main takeaways was that the answer you get depends on how you frame the question, because people have all kinds of thoughts and feelings, and how you bring them out depends on what you get.

Tetlock

Yes, I totally agree.

Forster

So there are multiple publics, but also the public, quote-unquote, contains multitudes, in a sense.

Tetlock I

It's an interesting question of how pliable is public opinion. Can you get them to agree to anything? There are some limits on what you can get them to agree to, but there certainly are significant question-framing effects.

Forster

And if the university, by the nature of its mission, has a sort of deal with society at large, then understanding how public opinion shapes and is shaped by the university is part of our job as academics.

Tetlock

Most academics would skirt that, and they would say that's the job of the president, the provost, and so forth. Those are the guys who are doing the PR, and faculty only get trotted out to deal with donors and trustees occasionally. But the fundamental responsibility of the professoriate is to maintain norms of free inquiry in the classroom and in their research labs.

Forster

Right. Once again, shared governance brings many tensions, but the alternatives are generally even worse. Phil, thank you so much. Really appreciate your being with us today.

Tetlock

Okay. I enjoyed it too.