

A Keynote Address

by Sidney Fein

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Ladies and gentlemen, I am going to begin with a confession. I have always been suspicious of academics who respect themselves. I admit I have said a pretty terrible thing, doing myself no honor and perhaps offending yours. I am anything but proud of saying such words, but I can't help it. Bear in mind that my suspiciousness is purely subjective, a feeling and not a conclusion, a sentiment in relation to certain of my colleagues that I regret and would rid myself of if I could. If I thought it proper to feel this suspicion I wouldn't have to call my statement a confession.

Because they generally disclose something disreputable confessions isolate. One declares a violation of the rules, a breach of decorum, an offense to taste, a crime of the heart. To confess is to show oneself up. Nevertheless, to confess is likewise an effort to reintroduce oneself into the community out of which one deserves to be thrust, so long as confession is accompanied by repentance. You, ladies and gentlemen, are such a community, an assembly of academics who do not deserve to be insulted. I hope that, even in

the face of what I have said, you might be able to include me among your number, that like Lord Jim I might still be one of you. The difficulty is that I am not repentant. I am still troubled by the self-respect of academics and I don't exempt myself. It will not surprise you if I say that, in so far as I too am an academic, I find it hard to respect myself.

Well, why should I be suspicious of academics who are confident and proud of their achievements, pleased with their degrees and titles, at home with their professional lives? I'm not altogether sure. It isn't just that so many of them tend to turn into administrators; nor do I think my suspicion can be put down to self-hatred with its source in my childhood or graduate training. It is, I willingly grant, perverse to find suspect those of my colleagues who are most assured and confident, who can defend their virtue and social utility. All the same, even as a perverse and personal sentiment, my suspicion seems to me worth thinking about.

When it is hard to think something through a good recourse for professors as for preachers is to adduce a text. So here is a text. In chapter four of the first part of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* is found the narrator's account of the spiteful Petersburg intellectual with a toothache. The passage is notorious and unforgettable.

I ask you, gentlemen, listen sometimes to the moans of an educated man of the nineteenth century suffering from toothache, on the second or third day of the attack, when he is beginning to moan, not as he moaned on the first day, that is, not simply because he has a toothache, not just as any coarse peasant, but as a man affected by progress and European civilization ...

Remember? Anyway, Dostoyevsky winds up with this less familiar statement:

You laugh? Delighted. My jests, gentlemen, are of course in bad taste, jerky, involved, lacking in self-confidence. But of course that is because I do not respect myself. Can

a man of perception ever really respect himself?

That is an arresting question, isn't it, maybe an improper question, doubtless in poor taste. Academics are above all people of perception; they too are deeply affected, if not by progress, then certainly by civilization, which they can think themselves into believing they incarnate. The most eminent carry such a load of perception that, to paraphrase a modern poet, within their fields they cannot be surprised. Surely this is by itself a sufficient motive for self-respect, even a *respectable* self-respect, if I can style it that way. And yet, it appears, not for me.

You might ask if I would prefer that professors should all be undergroundlings, miserable, isolated, victims of emotional self-abuse, like the many alienated part-timers and adjuncts who constitute a growing proletariat of the spirit. Well, even the original Underground Man shouts "to hell with the Underground." The adjuncts and part-timers, I'm sure, agree. No, that isn't it at all.

Self-respect can be an efficient and worthy virtue, like self-reliance and self-service. It can save one from accepting degradation; it can give one a platform from which to protest injustice. As human beings professors who respect themselves are certainly preferable to those who despise themselves. The same is true of butchers and auto mechanics. It is only those who respect themselves *because* they are professors that trouble me. Since I feel similarly toward politicians, perhaps what I am feeling is that certain professions ought to be more penetrated by irony than others, particularly where irony is the most accessible form of humility. Taking oneself too seriously is a sign of the absence of this saving grace. The presence of the wrong sort of self-respect is what I think leads to the pomposity and arrogance, the abstraction from reality with which writers of comedies from Aristophanes up readily identify the academic type.

The kind of academics that provoke my suspicion are not lacking in knowledge or perception, in expertise or formidable lists of publications; they are lacking in self-consciousness. There is too little corrosive acid in their brains. Surely "self-consciousness" is a better translation of Dostoyevsky: can a *self-*

conscious academic really respect him or herself? To this I am only adding with compunction the uncertain and perhaps ethically misguided addendum: and *ought* they to respect themselves? It's obvious that self-consciousness can undermine a thoughtless self-respect—perhaps even a thoughtful and justified self-respect—but it also brings one closer to those nasty truths that are to be found only in the underground. What is it I find suspicious if not a lack of self-consciousness which, reasoning backward from Dostoyevsky, I deduce from certain forms of self-respect? I believe that there are some academics who, should they be granted a moment of genuine self-consciousness, would simply blow up.

Wherein lies the dignity and self-respect proper to our profession? A good principle of human thought is that to understand north one should go south. So, following this principle, I want to look at a few academic jokes. Dostoyevsky's narrator tells jokes—jerky, involved ones—because he does not respect himself. What do academic jokes reveal about the respectability of our profession?

First joke, or rather an actual occurrence that is also a joke. A certain distinguished professor of linguistics was delivering an important paper at a scholarly conference. Wishing to introduce a little levity at the end of his lengthy and highly technical lecture—a levity he never supposed might be leaden—he spoke of the double negative, explaining that vulgar usage was in conflict with logic, where a double negative signifies an affirmative. "It is curious," he wound up with a smile at his own wit, "that there exists no such thing in our language as a double affirmative that results in a negative." Suddenly from the rear of the hall an exasperated colleague shouted out, "Sure, sure."

What is amusing about this story in the first instance is its punch line. The linguist's point about double negatives is something everyone already knows and for him to bring it up for the sake of a cheap finale is banal and insulting. That the facetious repetition of an affirmative functions as a negative is, however, something of which few people, probably even few linguists, will have thought. More importantly, this *particular* linguist hadn't thought of it. The joke works precisely because the joke is on him. He had intended

to entertain his audience with his own unfunny joke; he had been anticipating a gratifying ovation. His effort at wit is so clumsy and pompous, the peripeteia so sudden, that the shout of “Sure, sure” must surely pierce him to the heart. And doesn’t he deserve puncturing because, in my sense, he has respected himself too much? Not only does he look down his nose at the vulgarity of the double negative—though it was good enough for Shakespeare—he presumes his listeners will do so with him. No one who says “I don’t see no reason for it” is going to be in attendance at a linguistics conference; they are beyond the pale. But vulgarity, common usage, the commonplace, real life leaps up at the back of the hall like a viper and bites him. The laughter he meant to provoke actually breaks out, and at the right moment, but in that instant he has ceased to be the complacent purveyor of donnish wit and has turned into the butt of somebody else’s joke, a much better one than his, the mockery of someone who treats his specialty with the very irony he lacks. On top of all this he is proved wrong—and by a disagreement that takes the form of agreement. He has snatched annihilation from the jaws of approbation. If the right person slips on a banana peel—the blustering drill sergeant, the ruthless CEO, the head of the secret police, the giver of grades—everybody breaks up.

Later that night, perhaps in an airline seat paid for by university administrators who hoped to raise their own status through his lost triumph, maybe then our linguist began to reflect on his humiliation and on his whole life as an academic. I like to think that, five or six miles above the earth, he at last stumbled into the underground with its subversive questions. If he can be defeated by two syllables then what is he really? What value does his brilliant fifty-minute address have over against that commonplace, but diabolically clever riposte, which was grasped in an instant by everyone and will be remembered far longer? Is there a purpose to linguistics other than to make careers for linguists? Has he forgotten what it is? Do his students ever guess at his motives, how much of the *Wille zur Macht* lies behind his long-windedness and intricate examination questions, the petty vanity at the root of his carefully toted-up list of scholarly articles; do they ever suspect what an

ignoramus he actually is at times? And is it only “at times” that he is an ignoramus?

On the other hand, perhaps there was no redemptive existential crisis for this linguist in the air or on the land either, no solvent against which his impregnable self-respect was not proof. Who knows? He may even have begun to think of the best way to work the crack about the double affirmative into his next lecture.

The second joke is my favorite of all academic jokes. It is actually a sort of parable and, like all good parables, short and gravid.

Professor X is running down Professor Z to Professor Y. Y objects. “I don’t see how you can say those things about Z. The man knows everything.” “That’s right,” X replies, “but that’s *all* he knows.”

The story of the linguist is not ambiguous; this one is. The first story is comparatively superficial, perhaps because it is true; but this joke seems to me to have the depth and concentration only fiction achieves.

Who is the butt of this joke? Is it, as first appears, Professor Z, who only knows “everything”? Is Z one of those scholars who bestrides his field like a colossus and considers himself a good parent because, with only a little prompting, he is able to list all his children by their first names? Is Z a sort of idiot savant; that is, brilliant at polymer physics or comparative anthropology but an idiot about the price of eggs? Is his self-regard demolished by a remark that sounds like praise but is really contempt?

Or is the butt of the joke the credulous and adoring Professor Y, so quick to defend his idol with an obviously excessive claim? Z might not respect himself too much but Y does; he bows down before him as if Z were a god. There are academics who seek to dance around in the refulgence of some authority in their field as though he were the golden calf, who ground their own self-respect on the adoration of another with whom they try to associate, planets to his sun. X’s riposte, “that’s *all* he knows,” is, in this view, immeasurably more devastating to Y than the more customary “the hell he does.”

Or is the butt of the joke Professor X? He sounds like one of

those academics who ignore Socrates' advice to Meletus: not to run down others but to improve themselves. Professors of this sort, I think, abound because the Meletus-impulse is one of the nastier aspects of human nature exacerbated by academic life where status is at once relative, evanescent, and crucial. The word "status," incidentally, has the same root as "state" and "stature": *stare*, the Latin verb *to stand*. Where does one stand? To how many of us is this a perpetual anxiety? After all, why is X running down Z if not to increase his own comparative standing in the zero-sum game of academic status? And why does he wish to stand above Z if not in order to buttress his own self-respect which, for people like him, can only be searched for in the eyes of others? Perhaps X doesn't respect himself, but that is hardly in his favor, since he has made of his self-respect a motive for backbiting. Unable to deny the substantial achievements of Professor Z he finds an ingenious way of diminishing them. He accuses Z of being a fool. "Z knows everything, but that's *all* he knows."

From yet another point of view, even though the joke may explode X, Y, and Z it may not be directed at any of them personally. In this interpretation the real object of the joke is the abstraction and rivalry of academic life, which in its worst form is devoted to petty jealousies and an equally petty adoration as well as to "knowing *everything*"—while ignoring everything *else*. Knowing without understanding, careerism without philosophy, data without wisdom, lots of head and scarcely any heart. Academics, the joke seems to say, may know everything but little good it does them, or us.

I do not want you to think that I have no respect for our profession. On the contrary. What is most worthy of respect about the academy is never pragmatism, efficiency, or utility, let alone the self-regard or salaries of those who work in it. From Plato's time to ours what is respectable about academic life remains its idealism. The irony is that those who believe they have achieved this ideal, or are on the road to attaining it, or even that they will ever get there, have already lost sight of it.



EDITOR'S NOTE

In April 1978 Sidney Fein was invited to deliver the keynote address at a conference to be called "Academe at the Crossroads: The Status of the American Professoriate." The conference, organized and funded by the Laterlake Foundation, was scheduled for a week in October. The Foundation was subsequently compelled to withdraw its support owing to embezzlement by its C.F.O. Cancellation letters were sent out before the end of August.

In reviewing Fein's papers for 1978 I came across the above text, which I take to be a draft of this undelivered address, composed sometime between April and August of that year. It is in the form of a typescript with handwritten corrections. Fein's habit was to write lectures and letters on a typewriter, then revise by hand and retype. Work he deemed less ephemeral, essays and his three books, he always began with a fountain pen. I cannot say if Fein had completed or would actually have used this address. I doubt that it is in anything like final form. Still, what Fein has written is interesting and readily accessible. I offer it here in accord with his daughter's direction that I prepare any of her father's papers that merit posthumous publication.

Sidney Fein was an academic, though an intermittent, itinerant, and untenured one. He held visiting appointments at six institutions, none for more than three years. Thanks to family wealth he did not need to rely on an academic salary and there were several years when he held no such position at all. He gave himself sabbaticals to complete all three of his books.

Among Fein's published works there are few discussions of academic matters. However, in *Want, Desire, and Need* (1977), he offers a characterization of university life that is echoed in this address, drafted the following year. There Fein had lamented that "so much of academic life consists in listening to expressions of cynicism in a context of disingenuous idealism or of idealism in a context of low-down cynicism" (194). In this passage Fein is

speaking of “the underside of those large educational institutions organized along the same lines as the Inca Empire.” In his last book, *Aristocratic Democracy* (1983), Fein takes up this point about hierarchy from a different angle. Here he mordantly sketches out what he calls “the ineluctable conflict between elitism and democracy” in American higher education, briefly outlines the levels of status among professors, researchers, staff, and administrators, on whom he is hardest: “. . . despite their obvious and fundamental parasitism, administrators, enamored of the corporate model and eager to emulate it, have little difficulty in identifying the preeminent elite of the educational establishment as themselves” (257).

Fein’s judgments of academia appear to be harsh, but this is misleading. Sometimes he is just having fun. In fact, Fein enjoyed teaching and was deeply grateful for the opportunity various institutions afforded him of doing so. He had many academic friends, respected colleagues and former students. It is worth recalling that if Fein had really despised academic life he was in a position to eschew it. Though the tone of the above address appears derogatory, calculated to provoke an audience of professors, the jokes chosen to show academics at their worst, I think the emphasis ought to fall on his subtle closing statement about idealism. Fein certainly knew that the ideal of academic life is as unattainable as any other and that the purity of any ideal can be too exclusive, but in admitting this he will not relinquish the ideal as his standard of judgment.

Fein’s attitude toward academia was that of a satirist. Satirists and cynics both tend to be disappointed idealists. The difference is that cynics pass directly from naive faith in their ideal to expecting the lowest common denominator, never stopping at reality; satirists, on the other hand, seeing how far reality falls below their ideal, cannot help monitoring reality, being irritated by its failure, and saying so out loud.

Scattered among Fein’s papers are several items relevant to this address, and they are all humorous or satirical. The self-importance of certain of his colleagues, the pomposity of academic processions, the pretentiousness of academic procedures all provoked him. He clearly relished academic jokes. I have found several among

his papers, scribbled down without comment. Not all are at the expense of professors. For example, in his file for 1976 he recorded an amusing story about Robert Frost. Unfortunately, Fein does not give its provenance. I think it is worth including here.

Frost used to teach a course each summer in Vermont at the Breadloaf School for writers. Fein's anecdote implies that the poet was not a gifted or particularly hard-working teacher, and that he neither wanted nor pretended to be. Fein writes:

Frost would give the same final exam year after year, the single shopworn question, *What have you learned in this course?* A certain Mr. Smith, no doubt feeling exasperated and cheated of the grand experience he had imagined upon registering—three whole weeks at the feet of the Master!—wrote that he hadn't learned a damn thing and handed in his bluebook. The students were to return the following Monday to pick up their grades. Smith's bluebook had an "A-" on it. (N.B. This is already sufficient proof of Frost's wit.) Smith, who was not lacking in chutzpah, strode to the front of the room and demanded that Frost tell him why he hadn't received an A. Frost took the book, opened it, and pointing to what Smith had written in it, observed that he had spelled "damn" incorrectly.

Fein's disappointment with certain colleagues and his annoyance with the absurdities of academic life are also expressed in about a dozen epigrams scattered among his papers. They too are waspish and caustic, recording a falling away from Fein's conception of an ideal. Here are a few samples:

ON PROFESSOR X'S MIND

"Henry James had a mind so fine
no idea could violate it."
We must let out Eliot's line
to suit X and thus restate it:
there is no idea so divine

X's mind can't desecrate it.

TARDIF PROFESSEUR BLOIS

Professeur Blois is late to class,
as late as any French waiter.
His students do not cry "*Hélas!*"
Non! They wish that he were later.

PROFESSOR ASSENTATOR

So eager to be loved is he
his lowest grade's above a C;
gives little homework, yearns to be
his pupil's pal and chairman's chum,
though both know where he's coming from:
despised many, used by some.

AD. BLDG.

It flashes like a helm hard by the dorms,
locus classicus of a thousand forms,
proof against student protests, unions, storms,
distinguished, as one gradually discerns,
from lesser piles with lesser concerns:
there no one teaches, and nobody learns.

Sidney Fein may have laughed at the academy but rather as a loving parent does at the blunders of a child. What he called his "suspicion of academics who respect themselves" is a distaste for complacency, self-glorification, and the willful ignorance of institutional or personal motives that lead some academics to tumble into bathos or worse. Because universities were to him marvelous places peopled by remarkable individuals heavy with achievement or exalted by potentiality and dedicated to the worthiest of human aspirations—precisely for this reason universities were for Fein carpeted with banana peels.

