



Commentary on *Who Defends Democracy and Decency?* *Let's Maintain Standards for Maintaining Standards**

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Individual Agency and Structural Enforcement

"The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction ... and the distinction between true and false ... no longer exist." (Arendt 1951). Few ideas or inventions have been as revolutionary as democracy. It is a profound gift of freedom for an individual to be able to choose the doctrines by which their society is guided. Democracy is a house of cards, vulnerable to collapse in a multitude of ways, when individuals and organisations governed by such a system lack integrity, and are easily swayed by the allure of power, money, and convenience, the house comes tumbling down. Taswell's report begins from a similar premise, tracing a cascade from individual brain health, through family, community, and public health to democratic health itself, concluding that brain health ultimately requires democratic health (Taswell 2025). That cascade extends a definition the World Health Organization has held since its founding: health is "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization 1948). A definition of that shape already refuses to treat the health of a person as separable from the health of the society around them. This commentary aims to share this premise and extend it. Social standards, whether in politics, academia, business, or otherwise, survive only where individual moral agency and structural enforcement reinforce one another. Neither is sufficient alone.

A society populated by virtuous individuals, but lacking independent mechanisms of accountability, will be captured by those few who are not virtuous. A society with elaborate enforcement mechanisms, but no citizens willing to refuse complicity, will find those mechanisms carved out from within. This is, in essence, what Beim Graben et al. (2025) define as a healthy open society, one that is not destroyed by either its own members or members of other societies, through the cooperation of its members to prevent harm and a mutual respect for the sovereignty of other such societies. The sections that follow take up Taswell's argument point by point, aiming to address the question of how standards, once articulated, are actually maintained.

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Civility, Courtesy, Tolerance, and Respect

A community could perhaps be the smallest unit of democratic power, where democratic values are not only taught, but are practiced through cooperation, dialogue, and accountability. Martin Buber's distinction between the "I-Thou" and "I-It" relation is instructive here. A community that perceives its own members, and those adjacent to it, as means for the pursuit of power and wealth ("I-It"), cannot function and collapses under the weight of its own paradoxical nature. Only a community where individuals are equal and aligned for the sustenance of civility, courtesy, tolerance, and respect in practice, not merely in principle ("I-Thou"), can function (Buber 1970). Our communities must therefore encourage people, scholars, business leaders, and politicians alike to practice these values in how they speak to one another, and also in how they conduct their public and private affairs. Modern dialogue between governments, private companies, and institutional leaders is too often characterised by secrecy rather than openness. Major powers safeguard their own advantage even where doing so comes at the cost of the biological, communal, and institutional health of the societies they serve. The current trajectory of artificial intelligence development is one clear case in point.

Academics, business leaders, and politicians are not merely role models for their communities, they also bear a duty to act as safety officers for the systems they help sustain. The individual, democratic, and institutional health of our societies reflects the degree to which this responsibility is respected. Scholars should practice citational justice and refrain from ghosting the work of their peers through wilful disregard. Likewise, politicians should practice representational justice and refrain from ghosting one another through wilful disregard. Business leaders, though not elected, must also be forced via appropriate legislation to act in the interest, whether indirectly or directly, of the society in which they are operating.

Leadership, Integrity, and Free Will

Taswell (2025) writes that "the structural integrity of any organization — whether a geopolitical state or an academic institution — depends upon the moral integrity of its leaders". I believe this understates the role of our free will. While the head of any institution, whether private or political, may determine the structural make-up of a society and the institutions that follow from it, the society itself, I believe, is constituted by the sum of the minute choices each individual mem-

ber makes. An individual who chooses to work for a tyrant, even if they would rather work elsewhere, remains responsible for the choice to uphold the tyrant's office. Max Planck made a related point in his own defence of free will. Asking what we mean when we say that the human will is free, he answers: "That we are always given the chance of choosing between two alternatives when it comes to a question of making a decision" (Planck 1932, p. 104). This remains true regardless of who occupies the seat of institutional power. Even if a leader assures the population, perhaps repeatedly and publicly, that they act for the collective benefit of the people, and even if that professed integrity is reflected by followers who uphold their society accordingly, there will always exist those within society who tend toward deception, who lust for power (Dostoyevsky 2000): "Now I ask you: what can be expected of man since he is a being endowed with strange qualities? Shower upon him every earthly blessing, drown him in a sea of happiness, so that nothing but bubbles of bliss can be seen on the surface; give him economic prosperity, such that he should have nothing else to do but sleep, eat cakes and busy himself with the continuation of his species, and even then out of sheer ingratitude, sheer spite, man would play you some nasty trick."

Enforcing Ethical Behaviour Without Mandating Speech

I agree that political leaders should be held to a defined set of ethical standards. On its surface, this assertion seems unproblematic and likely to yield proper political conduct. However, even where the underlying ethics are democratically agreed, legislating to mandate specific individual behaviours, particularly when the behaviour in question does not fall into the category of objectively immoral or unethical (murder, for example), elicits the idea that the legislator is the only moral arbiter whose definition of morality is upheld by the state's law enforcement. I believe this places too much trust in the legislator who, much like the citizens he or she presides over, is fallible. Take legislation seeking to mandate the correct usage of personal pronouns, for example. While the intent to protect a marginalised community is admirable, mandated speech is problematic in any context. It depends on the continued presence of a benevolent authority unlikely to abuse the power to compel speech, and there is no guarantee that such benevolence will persist. This raises a further question, one that Kant's discourse-ethical successors have also wrestled with: who decides these ethical standards, how are they enforced, and how might they be updated over time (Bordum 2005). A universally agreed set of ethical standards might serve as a partial definition, or at least a common characteristic, of religion. In a multicultural society composed of many faiths and beliefs, how are we ever to agree on one? "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear" (Orwell 1972).

Darvomania and the Dissolution of Truth

Global misinformation is increasingly served by darvomanic interests. Darvomania, a term coined by Taswell (2025) and derived from the acronym DARVO (deny, attack, reverse victim and offender), describes a pattern of denial, attack, and role-reversal used to obscure wrongdoing and protect power. The acronym describes how perpetrators evade accountability: by denying the offence, attacking the credibility of the accuser, and finally presenting themselves as the true victim while recasting the original victim as the offender (Freyd 1997). Darvomanic interest thrives on the death of truth, for the ideal subject of totalitarian

rule is not a committed believer in any particular ideology, but someone for whom the distinction between fact and fiction has simply ceased to exist (Arendt 1951). It is therefore our civic duty to uphold the truth and deny falsehood. Václav Havel made a related point about the totalitarian systems he lived under: "Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. The principle must embrace and permeate everything. There are no terms whatsoever on which it can co-exist with living within the truth, and therefore everyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety" (Havel et al. 1985, p. 40). Since the pandemic of darvomania was first described, it has worsened, threatening the stability of open societies in several domains.

Academic Misconduct as the Same Corruption in a Different Arena

Political leaders, academic professors, business executives, and major shareholders are all accountable to the same social and legal standards. A system that exempts one class of actor from scrutiny is corrupt in constitution, not merely by degree. Democratic decay and academic misconduct share a common root in exactly this asymmetry. Foreign and private lobbying subverts democracy by severing influence from consequence. Equally, unchecked financial incentives in academia sever research from integrity when reward structures prioritise funding and advancement over accountability. These conditions do not merely reflect individual moral failure, they create environments in which systems become vulnerable to distortion. When influence operates without consequence, or success without scrutiny, institutional safeguards weaken (Gilens et al. 2014). As Taswell notes in his essay, darvomanic misconduct in academia is clearly displayed by the for-profit nature of so many journals, universities, and research institutions themselves, and by the corrosion of the very principles meant to govern open scholarship (Craig et al. 2019). It is a privilege to be educated to the degree that one can stand on the shoulders of giants. Earning such privilege requires the investment of time, energy, effort, and resources from a multitude of professors, lecturers, teachers, supervisors, family, and friends, not to mention the functioning community and society that make such support possible. To take that dedication and redirect it toward the attainment of wealth and power, using and abusing the work of other individuals and groups along the way, is fundamentally against the ethics of science and damaging to the institution of academia itself.

From Endless Wars to Maintained Peace

Moral arbiters, enforcers of healthy democratic and socially responsible standards, must act in favor of such standards and independent of political leaders or parties, private companies, or academic institutions. When arbitration or enforcement is not aligned in this manner, a society becomes pathological. Séverine Autesserre's account of UN peacekeeping's recurrent failures locates the problem in this misalignment; peacekeeping missions designed on imported, top-down templates falter, while those grounded in local legitimacy have some record of holding (Autesserre, Severine 2019). The democratic peace literature associated with Michael Doyle offers a counter-intuitive explanation for war's relative absence between democracies. Functioning democracies, by constitution, have clear and obvious constraints on unilateral action. Such societies prevent war, or maintain peace, not by benevolent intentions of a single prime minister or president alone, but by the constitutional prevention of totalitarian behavior (Doyle 2024). Both

arguments, external legitimacy of arbitration and enforcement, and intrinsic division of power, echo Taswell's own case for judicial term limits and an independent Department of Justice. Peace, like research integrity, holds only when power answers to the vision of a brighter future, irrespective of immediate or short-term gain.

The claim that democratic social standards must be enforced by independent arbiters and enforcers is unfinished. As mentioned, democratic standards require both structural enforcement and individual moral agency. Independent institutional checks on the pathological wielding of power may only function because the bodies tasked with the maintenance of such standards are made up of individuals motivated to act on their judgment. Standards should be enforced with tolerance and empathy wherever possible. That being said, tolerance and empathy have their limits. Those who persist in harm despite being confronted must still be stopped.

Firmness in cases of enforcement or arbitration need not curdle into self-righteousness. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's warning applies to enforcer and offender alike: "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being" (Solzhenitsyn 1975). Implicit in the design of democracy is the idea that we are all fallible; standards cannot rest on any single arbiter's virtue. They rest, as Solzhenitsyn also argued, on the accumulated refusal of ordinary people to participate in what they know to be false: "the simplest and most accessible key to our self-neglected liberation lies right here: personal non-participation in lies... it is the easiest thing to do for us but the most devastating for the lies" (Solzhenitsyn 1974). Standards, between nations or within a laboratory, are maintained the same way — not by the vigilance of the few, but by the daily refusal of the many.

Closing

Taswell asks how badly society must corrode before politics and academia begin to heal, and whether one must recover before the other can. It may be argued that the order matters less than the shared mechanism. Standards, whether defended in a courtroom, a journal, or a peacekeeping mandate, are not self-enforcing. They are a responsibility borne at every level of the hierarchy, from citizen to scholar to leader. Social standards endure only for as long as enough people, at every level of this social hierarchy, act with integrity and refuse to tolerate otherwise. Without this refusal, repeated daily and without much reward, neither democratic health nor epistemic integrity can survive; with it, both remain, however imperfectly, defended.

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