



Fiduciary Governance Failures and Conflicts of Interest at PhilPapers

Why PhilPapers Must Act Now to Ensure Accountability and Fairness

Peter Kahl; independent researcher; first published 'free-range' 6 July 2025 on Substack

Abstract

In this essay, I critically examine fiduciary governance failures and conflicts of interest at PhilPapers, focusing particularly on the dual governance and editorial roles held by Professors David Chalmers and David Bourget. Drawing upon fiduciary theory, epistemic justice principles, and my prior scholarship, I argue that the concentration of both governance oversight and editorial decision-making within the same individuals creates structural conflicts that severely compromise transparency, impartiality, and accountability. These governance deficiencies not only undermine the legitimacy and scholarly integrity of PhilPapers but also contribute to epistemic injustice by diminishing scholars' epistemic autonomy and trust globally. To address these issues, I

propose immediate reforms including clear structural separation of fiduciary and editorial roles, establishment of an independent oversight board, rigorous transparency and accountability measures, and meaningful mechanisms for stakeholder responsiveness. The implementation of these reforms is essential, not only for restoring integrity at PhilPapers but also as a globally significant precedent for similar scholarly platforms and epistemic gatekeepers.

Keywords

PhilPapers, David Chalmers, David Bourget, fiduciary governance, conflicts of interest, fiduciary duties, governance reform, epistemic justice, epistemic fiduciaries, institutional accountability, scholarly integrity, epistemic autonomy, fiduciary ethics, epistemic injustice, academic governance, transparency, accountability, structural conflicts, stakeholder responsiveness, scholarly communication, Peter Kahl

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Scope of this Essay

In this essay, I critically examine fiduciary governance failures and conflicts of interest inherent in the organisational structure of PhilPapers, focusing particularly on the dual roles held by its founders and directors, Professors David Chalmers and David Bourget. I argue that combining governance responsibilities and editorial control poses significant ethical and fiduciary issues, undermining the integrity, legitimacy, fairness, and transparency expected from a prominent scholarly institution.

While related concerns, including disciplinary siloisation and inadequate epistemic classification at PhilPapers, have been central themes of my previous research—especially in ‘Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design’ (2025) and ‘Epistemocracy in Higher Education’ (2025)—they will not be revisited extensively here. Readers interested in those analyses should consult the mentioned works directly, as the current essay deliberately maintains a narrower scope centred on fiduciary responsibilities and structural conflicts of interest.

Importantly, my critique of PhilPapers holds universal significance, extending beyond one organisation to encompass broader concerns about fiduciary governance and conflicts of interest at similar scholarly platforms and epistemic gatekeepers worldwide. Thus, this analysis contributes to global discussions on transparency, fairness, and epistemic justice, directly affecting scholars everywhere.

1.2. Contextual Background

PhilPapers is a widely used academic repository for philosophical scholarship, maintained by the PhilPapers Foundation, a Canadian not-for-profit organisation affiliated with the Centre for Digital Philosophy at Western University {PhilPapers 2025}. The Foundation’s stated mission is to support philosophical research and education through maintaining a comprehensive, curated index of philosophical literature. Despite its non-profit status and influential role, the foundation’s governance structure remains troublingly opaque, raising fiduciary concerns about accountability and transparency {Kahl, ‘An Open Letter to David Chalmers and David Bourget’ 2025}.

Professors David Chalmers and David Bourget hold considerable authority within PhilPapers. Both are directors of the PhilPapers Foundation, entrusted with fiduciary oversight, financial management, and organisational accountability. Simultaneously, they serve as general editors of PhilPapers, controlling content decisions and inclusion criteria {PhilPapers 2025}. This structural duality—where governance and editorial authority converge—is ethically problematic, raising legitimate concerns about conflicts of interest, impartiality, and fairness in scholarly decision-making processes. Such concentration of power exemplifies precisely the institutional risks associated with opaque and unaccountable structures of authority critiqued by Michel Foucault {Foucault 1977}.

As I have extensively argued in ‘Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness’ (2025), directors and fiduciaries must uphold transparency and impartiality to preserve institutional legitimacy. The existing governance arrangement at PhilPapers falls significantly short of these fiduciary standards, a point I have recently underscored in my open letter addressing these fiduciary shortcomings directly to Professors Chalmers and Bourget {Kahl, ‘An Open Letter to David Chalmers and David Bourget’ 2025}. This essay, therefore, critically analyses these ethical failures and proposes reforms aimed explicitly at restoring integrity, accountability, and epistemic justice—an urgent issue relevant to scholarly institutions globally.

2. Fiduciary Governance Failures at PhilPapers

2.1. Principles of Fiduciary Governance

Fiduciary governance is underpinned by fundamental duties owed by directors and trustees to the organisations they lead and the stakeholders they serve. Central to these fiduciary duties are loyalty, care, transparency, openness, and accountability. The duty of loyalty requires fiduciaries to act solely in the organisation's best interests, placing organisational goals above personal or conflicting interests {Frankel 2011}. The duty of care demands fiduciaries act prudently, exercising sound judgment and informed decision-making that serves the broader interests of stakeholders.

Transparency, openness, and accountability are equally critical fiduciary duties. Transparency obliges fiduciaries to disclose relevant information proactively, enabling meaningful oversight and scrutiny by stakeholders. Openness involves creating accessible channels for stakeholders to engage with governance decisions and voice legitimate concerns. Finally, accountability ensures fiduciaries remain answerable for their decisions, actively taking responsibility for their governance actions and inactions {Barnett 2018; Kahl, 'Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness' 2025}.

When fiduciary governance structures lack adherence to these principles, organisations risk ethical breaches, conflicts of interest, loss of legitimacy, and erosion of public trust—conditions clearly evident in PhilPapers' governance model.

2.2. Analysis of Governance Opacity

PhilPapers exhibits troubling opacity in governance, significantly diverging from fiduciary principles outlined above. The PhilPapers Foundation, despite being a Canadian not-for-profit entity, provides minimal accessible information regarding its organisational oversight mechanisms, internal decision-making processes, or financial transparency {Kahl, 'An Open Letter to David Chalmers and David Bourget' 2025}.

Key governance documents such as annual financial reports, board meeting minutes, and fiduciary oversight policies—standard disclosures for comparable non-profit entities—are absent or inaccessible from PhilPapers' public domain. The website offers only sparse and generic information about its organisational structure, and crucial details on how governance decisions are made remain undisclosed {PhilPapers 2025}.

Moreover, communication channels intended to facilitate transparency and accountability are demonstrably inadequate. My repeated attempts to communicate legitimate fiduciary concerns directly to PhilPapers and its directors have been systematically ignored, as documented in my recent publication {Kahl, 'An Open Letter to David Chalmers and David Bourget' 2025}. Such opacity represents not mere administrative oversight but significant fiduciary failure, fundamentally undermining stakeholder trust and organisational legitimacy.

2.3. Impact of Fiduciary Governance Failures

These governance failures at PhilPapers directly produce epistemic injustice and significantly reduce scholars' epistemic autonomy. Epistemic injustice arises when individuals or communities are unfairly excluded from participating fully in the creation, dissemination, or validation of knowledge, a theme I have explored in depth

in my earlier research, notably in ‘Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design’ (2025). PhilPapers’ opacity prevents scholars from understanding how editorial and governance decisions affecting their scholarship are made, fostering a climate of uncertainty, exclusion, and suspicion.

Reduced epistemic autonomy, as articulated by Joseph Raz, occurs when stakeholders’ capacity to form independent, informed judgments is undermined by institutional opacity and lack of accountability {Raz 1986}. In failing to meet fiduciary obligations of transparency and accountability, PhilPapers inhibits scholars’ informed engagement with epistemic decision-making processes. My work ‘Epistemic Humility and the Transposition of Ethical Duties into Epistemic Duties’ (2025) further elaborates how organisational opacity directly damages scholarly trust, epistemic agency, and institutional credibility.

Critically, these fiduciary governance failures directly undermine PhilPapers’ legitimacy as an epistemic authority and trusted scholarly resource. Legitimacy depends fundamentally upon transparent governance practices and accountability mechanisms that earn scholars’ confidence. The lack of fiduciary transparency and accountability at PhilPapers damages scholars’ trust globally, raising questions about its credibility and reliability as a central epistemic resource. Therefore, addressing fiduciary governance failures is essential not only for PhilPapers’ own institutional integrity but also for safeguarding epistemic trust within global scholarly communication.

3. Conflicts of Interest: Chalmers and Bourget

3.1. Dual Roles and Structural Conflicts

A central conflict of interest at PhilPapers arises from the overlapping roles held by Professors David Chalmers and David Bourget. Both occupy simultaneous positions as directors of the PhilPapers Foundation and as general editors responsible for editorial decision-making and content curation. These dual responsibilities are inherently incompatible, combining fiduciary oversight duties—which demand impartiality, fairness, and accountability—with editorial roles requiring subjective epistemic judgments regarding inclusion, exclusion, and visibility of scholarly work.

As directors of the PhilPapers Foundation, Chalmers and Bourget hold fiduciary responsibilities that require them to act transparently and impartially in the best interests of scholars and stakeholders {Frankel 2011; Kahl, ‘Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness’ 2025}. Conversely, their editorial roles inevitably entail exercising discretionary judgment that directly impacts individual scholars’ visibility, career prospects, and scholarly reputations. This convergence of fiduciary governance authority and editorial discretion in the same individuals generates structural conflicts that cannot be ethically or practically reconciled, undermining fiduciary integrity and epistemic fairness.

3.2. Conflict as Competing Scholars and Gatekeepers

Another significant conflict stems from the status of Chalmers and Bourget as active scholars within the same epistemic community they oversee. Both individuals actively publish and engage in scholarly research, thus directly competing epistemically with other scholars whose work they simultaneously curate, review, and manage on PhilPapers. This dual position—gatekeeper and competitor—introduces clear epistemic conflicts, as

they are placed in the problematic position of evaluating and potentially disadvantaging scholars whose research might conflict with or challenge their own.

As I have previously argued in ‘Epistemic Gatekeepers and Epistemic Injustice by Design’ (2025), this epistemic duality distorts scholarly neutrality, undermines impartial judgment, and damages the epistemic credibility and fairness essential to a reputable scholarly platform. Such epistemic gatekeeping by competing scholars inevitably creates suspicion of bias, reduces scholarly trust, and compromises the fairness of the platform.

Michel Foucault’s insights into institutional power further illuminate this conflict: when the same individuals control knowledge curation and participate as active epistemic agents within that knowledge field, institutional power structures risk becoming oppressive and self-serving, rather than transparent and equitable {Foucault 1977}.

3.3. Additional Institutional Conflicts

The conflicts of interest at PhilPapers are further compounded by other professional positions and editorial roles occupied by Chalmers and Bourget, increasing the potential for bias or partiality. David Chalmers holds professorship positions at New York University (NYU), affiliated with both Philosophy and Neural Science, and maintains close scholarly affiliations with the Australian National University (ANU). He is extensively involved in various editorial boards and research centres that overlap significantly with the epistemic domains curated by PhilPapers.

David Bourget holds faculty and administrative roles at Western University in Canada, overseeing other projects under the umbrella of the Centre for Digital Philosophy, such as PhilPeople, PhilJobs, and PhilEvents. This concentration of control over multiple influential scholarly services further intensifies concerns regarding impartiality and fiduciary accountability, explicitly highlighting the need for transparent governance structures and clear separation of powers.

Together, these structural conflicts, epistemic competition, and additional institutional affiliations significantly increase the risk of epistemic injustice and fiduciary breaches. Addressing these overlapping conflicts requires deliberate structural reform, emphasising clear fiduciary accountability and rigorous separation between editorial roles and fiduciary governance.

4. Governance Reform Proposals

4.1. Structural Separation of Editorial and Fiduciary Roles

To effectively resolve the structural conflicts of interest identified at PhilPapers, fundamental reform is necessary: clear, formal separation of editorial decision-making responsibilities from fiduciary governance oversight. As my analysis demonstrates, combining these roles undermines impartial governance, damages epistemic trust, and risks institutional legitimacy. Separating these responsibilities ensures fiduciary governance—characterised by impartiality, fairness, and transparency—remains independent of subjective editorial processes. Such separation is a recognised best practice in fiduciary governance, ensuring epistemic and fiduciary responsibilities remain distinct and accountable {Frankel 2011; Kahl, ‘Directors’ Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness’ 2025}.

To implement this reform, Chalmers and Bourget should relinquish their roles either as fiduciary directors or as general editors, enabling independent individuals to occupy these critical positions. While this may present practical challenges, such as identifying suitable replacements, the long-term benefits of restoring credibility and legitimacy justify immediate steps toward this structural clarity.

4.2. Independent Oversight Board Establishment

In conjunction with structural separation, PhilPapers should establish an independent oversight board to ensure effective external accountability. This board should include external fiduciary governance experts, scholars unaffiliated with PhilPapers' editorial processes, and diverse stakeholder representatives drawn from multiple disciplinary backgrounds and geographic regions to ensure comprehensive inclusivity.

The oversight board's responsibilities would involve monitoring compliance with fiduciary duties, proactively addressing conflict-of-interest situations, and holding fiduciaries accountable for governance decisions. The board should operate transparently, publishing regular reports, fiduciary assessments, and comprehensive evaluations of governance practices, serving as a replicable model for similar scholarly platforms internationally.

4.3. Transparency and Accountability Measures

To strengthen fiduciary governance, PhilPapers must adopt comprehensive transparency and accountability measures aligned with recognised fiduciary standards. First, detailed governance documentation—including annual financial reports, fiduciary policy statements, clear organisational structures, and explicit decision-making procedures—must be proactively published and easily accessible via the PhilPapers website.

Second, PhilPapers should commit to annual fiduciary audits conducted by independent auditors. These audits should rigorously assess governance practices, conflict-of-interest management, and fiduciary duty compliance, providing objective assessments to stakeholders. Findings must be publicly disclosed through annual fiduciary accountability reports, demonstrating institutional commitment to openness, fairness, and continuous improvement. Though regular audits require resources and organisational commitment, their necessity for restoring scholarly trust justifies prioritisation.

4.4. Stakeholder Responsiveness and Participation

Lastly, meaningful mechanisms for stakeholder responsiveness and participation must be established. PhilPapers should create accessible, formal channels enabling scholars and users to submit inquiries, feedback, and complaints efficiently. A dedicated fiduciary ombudsperson or independent officer should oversee these mechanisms, ensuring impartial and timely responses to external stakeholder concerns.

Clearly defined timelines for responding to stakeholder inquiries (e.g., within 30 days) should be implemented to reinforce accountability and transparency. By actively facilitating stakeholder engagement and addressing community concerns through structured processes, PhilPapers can demonstrate genuine fiduciary responsibility, respect for epistemic agency, and commitment to inclusive governance. These proposed mechanisms, while specifically relevant to PhilPapers, could serve as exemplary practices for comparable scholarly platforms globally, reinforcing their universal significance and practical impact.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Restatement of Key Issues

In this essay, I have critically examined significant fiduciary governance failures and conflicts of interest inherent within PhilPapers' organisational structure. Central to these issues are the overlapping roles of Professors David Chalmers and David Bourget, who simultaneously occupy fiduciary governance positions and editorial roles. This duality compromises essential fiduciary principles of transparency, impartiality, and accountability, fostering institutional opacity, epistemic injustice, and diminished scholarly trust. Collectively, these governance deficiencies severely undermine PhilPapers' legitimacy as an authoritative scholarly platform.

5.2. Call for Immediate Action and Implementation

To address these critical governance shortcomings, I propose the immediate implementation of the following reforms:

- Structural separation between fiduciary governance and editorial decision-making responsibilities.
- Establishment of an independent oversight board, composed of diverse stakeholders, ensuring robust external accountability.
- Comprehensive transparency and accountability measures, including public governance documentation, annual fiduciary audits, and explicit fiduciary accountability reporting.
- Formal mechanisms for active stakeholder responsiveness and participation, incorporating clear processes and defined timelines for addressing community concerns.

The urgency of adopting these governance reforms cannot be overstated. PhilPapers is encouraged to publicly acknowledge these concerns and promptly initiate these corrective measures. Restoring the platform's institutional legitimacy and epistemic fairness is critical, not only for PhilPapers but also as a globally significant precedent for similar scholarly platforms and epistemic gatekeepers. Implementing these proposals will substantially enhance the credibility, transparency, and integrity of scholarly communication worldwide.

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Author Contact Information

Author: Peter Kahl, independent researcher

ORCID: <<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843>>

Email: <peter.kahl@juris.vc>

LinkedIn: <<https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/>>

GitHub: <<https://github.com/Peter-Kahl>>

PhilPapers: <<https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl>>

Blog: <<https://pkahl.substack.com/>>

Correspondence regarding this paper is welcome.



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