



Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?

How academia buries its head to avoid the unsanctioned

Peter Kahl; independent researcher; first published 'free-range' 24 June 2025 on Substack

Prologue

Knowledge, by nature, resists confinement. Yet, academia's institutional landscape is shaped by walls, boundaries, and meticulously policed epistemic borders. Ideas require permission, approval, validation. Gatekeepers patrol corridors, safeguarding disciplinary identities, scholarly traditions, and authoritative claims. Knowledge produced outside these boundaries—unfootnoted, peer-unapproved, intellectually ungoverned—is not merely marginalised; it is feared.

This fear, however, is rarely acknowledged. Instead, it manifests quietly in mechanisms of epistemic control: peer review, citation metrics, tenure assessments, curricula design. Academia thus becomes the ostrich—head buried deliberately in institutional sand—to avoid confronting knowledge that might threaten established truths, unsettle hierarchies, or challenge prevailing paradigms.

Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge? is a multimodal poetic thesis exploring precisely this

institutional anxiety. Blending poetry, philosophical commentary, and visual representation, it interrogates academia's epistemic responsibilities and ethical commitments, laying bare the contradictions between fiduciary obligations and epistemic virtues. Grounded in my broader scholarly inquiry into epistemic humility, justice, and

openness, this work invites readers to rethink scholarly courage, institutional integrity, and the very meaning of knowledge itself.

May it serve as both a provocation and invitation—an incitement to lift heads, embrace the unsanctioned, and let knowledge roam freely, undisciplined and alive.

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Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?

The ostrich is the scholar,
tenure at his back—
but buries all that threatens form
in sand that hides the cracks.

Above, the wind sets papers free—
ideas unpenned,
not footnoted by patriarchy,
nor peer-reviewed by friends.

A cap lies still beside the hole,
its tassel limp with dust.
He fears the thought that roams unbound,
unbranded, yet robust.

He asks: *Who cleared this rogue insight?*
What board endorsed its claim?
But truth, uncatalogued, still moves—
untethered, free of name.

Let knowledge range, undisciplined,
unshackled from decree.
To think is not to kneel and nod,
but to lift the head—and see.

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Philosophical Commentary

In the poem *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?*, I employ metaphor to critique the epistemic culture of contemporary academia. The figure of the ostrich deliberately symbolises the scholar who, despite the security granted by tenure, consciously buries his head in the sand. This act is not simply one of ignorance, but a wilful avoidance of ideas that lack formal institutional approval. It signifies the intentional refusal of knowledge that has not undergone the customary scrutiny of peer review committees, citation norms, or other mechanisms that regulate scholarly legitimacy.

The poem's second stanza—"Above, the wind sets papers free—ideas unpenned..."—offers a deliberate contrast. These papers, representing knowledge free from institutional gatekeeping, are explicitly not "footnoted by patriarchy" nor "peer-reviewed by friends." Here, I highlight subtle yet powerful mechanisms within academia that restrict knowledge production. These mechanisms often masquerade as neutral validation procedures but frequently serve as gatekeepers of ideological conformity.

This critique aligns closely with my earlier arguments concerning epistemic justice and institutional responsibility. Specifically, I have articulated elsewhere the concept of institutionalised epistemic refusal: the systematic marginalisation of knowledge that institutions find uncomfortable or threatening {Kahl 2025, *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia*}. Furthermore, my scholarly work on fiduciary epistemics explores the necessary intersection of fiduciary duties (such as loyalty, care, accountability, and non-maleficence) with epistemic virtues (humility, openness, and epistemic justice). I argue that separating fiduciary duties from epistemic virtues transforms institutions

from genuine epistemic trustees into mere custodians of prevailing academic norms {Kahl 2025, *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness*}.

The ostrich-scholar embodies precisely this disciplined fear: institutionalised, internalised, and epistemically normalised. His questions—"Who cleared this rogue insight?"—reflect the bureaucratic and administrative control of knowledge production, echoing what I describe elsewhere as epistemic licensing regimes {Kahl 2025, *Epistocracy in Higher Education*}. Such regimes decide what counts as legitimate knowledge, thereby shaping the epistemic landscape in ways that privilege orthodoxy over innovation and conformity over intellectual courage.

The poem's concluding stanza serves as a direct ethical imperative:

"To think is not to kneel and nod, / but to lift the head—and see."

Here I emphasise that true epistemic humility requires not passive compliance but active, courageous engagement with knowledge that is challenging, inconvenient, or institutionally unapproved. If my scholarly work advocates explicitly for fiduciary-epistemic reforms in academia, this poem embodies that advocacy in metaphorical and imaginative form.

Thus, *Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?* is more than a poetic reflection—it represents a philosophical and epistemic intervention. It calls on scholars and institutions to rethink their relationship to knowledge itself, highlighting the ethical necessity of openness, humility, and intellectual courage within academia.

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Cite this work

Peter Kahl, 'Who is Afraid of Free-Range Knowledge?' (Substack, 24 June 2025) <<https://pkahl.substack.com/p/free-range-knowledge-poem-academic-gatekeeping>>