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**Philosophy vs. Political Economy:  
The Case of Porn-thesis in a Turkish University**

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## **Philosophy vs. Political Economy: The Case of Porn-thesis in a Turkish University**

**Bülent Temel**

### **Abstract**

This article examines a controversial case in a Turkish university in 2010 in which an undergraduate student in the department of visual communications design prepared a porn video as his graduation thesis. The project, which was carried out ‘to find out the limits of academic freedom’ resulted in the firings of three professors, and sparked a heated debate in the country. This article interprets this case from the distinct perspectives of philosophy and political economy. History of science tells us that knowledge is a function of a diversion of ethics from morality no less than that of conventional thinking. While the subject case may be controversial from a normative angle of morality, it is endorsable from the viewpoint of academic freedom. Moreover, practical links between the academia and politics in Turkey’s higher education system bring political economy of academics into the picture, and a question of whether a secular and libertarian state is a prerequisite of human progress emerge from this analysis.

**JEL Codes:** B20

**Keywords:** *Academic freedom, philosophy, political economy, morality, progress.*

## **Felsefeye Karşılık Politik İktisat: Bir Türk Üniversitesindeki Porno Tezi Vakası**

**Bülent Temel**

### **Özet**

Bu yazı 2010 yılında bir Türk üniversitesinde görsel iletişim programı bitirme tezi olarak bir porno videosu sunan bir lisans öğrencisinin büyük tartışma yaratan vakasını tartışmaktadır. "Akademik özgürlüğün sınırlarını test etmek için" hazırlanan proje üç öğretim üyesinin işten çıkarılmasıyla sonuçlanırken ülkede ateşli bir tartışmayı da başlattı. Bu yazı söz konusu vakayı felsefe ve politik iktisat disiplinlerinin kendilerine özgü bakış açılarından yorumlamaktadır. Bilimler tarihi bilginin geleneksel düşünceden sapma kadar iş ahlakının ahlaktan ayrıklaştırılmasının da bir fonksiyonu olduğunu söyler. Söz konusu vaka normatif ahlak açısından tartışmalı olabilirken akademik özgürlüğün perspektifinden desteklenebilir bir vakadır. İlaveten, Türkiye'nin yüksek öğretim sisteminde yerleşik olan akademi-siyaset bağlantısı resme eğitimin politik iktisadı konusunu da sokmakta ve böyle bir resimden de laik ve özgürlükçü bir devletin insani gelişme için bir önkoşul olup olmadığı sorusu çıkmaktadır.

**JEL Kodu:** B20

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Akademik özgürlük, felsefe, politik iktisat, ahlak, ilerleme

## INTRODUCTION

An interview that was published in the Turkish monthly magazine *Tempo* in the early 2011 sparked an intriguing debate on the topics of freedom, morality and progress. An undergraduate student at Istanbul's Bilgi University prepared a porn movie as his graduation thesis in the school's undergraduate program in visual communications design. His motivation was, in his words, 'to do something to show me the limits of academic freedom' (Türker, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Despite initial reservation, the student's thesis directors turned on a green light to the idea. With the help of five classmates who worked as actors or technical crew, the movie was shot in the university's studios at Kuştepe. The thesis that displayed softcore heterosexual sex scenes ended up taking an F, which compelled the student to graduate only after preparing a makeup project. While the thesis did not stir any debate, its leakage to the outside of the university did. When the student gave an interview to the monthly *Tempo* magazine about the thesis, it started a public controversy that eventually resulted in the firings of three professors who were associated with the work.

The news started a colorful debate in the country. A score of observers criticized the thesis as an inappropriate endeavor that has no place in academia. The students who prepared such a project and the academic staff who approved its preparation were all out of line, according to this view. Punitive reaction of the university's administration was justified as it protected both the respectability of the university and the moral nucleus of the society. On the other side, supporters of the thesis argued that academic freedom cannot be restrained if academia is expected to continue to guide the human progress. The subject thesis is a valuable project as it underscores the importance of this principle regardless of whether or not it furthers the body of knowledge in the field of visual communications design. Throughout the history, new knowledge was created as a result of the courage and creativity of iconoclasts who did what was considered unacceptable by the society for the sake of satisfying curiosity. Without their fortitude, societies would not have advanced, and human conditions would not have improved. Adventure of the student and the

judgments of his thesis committee must be applauded as strongly as the decision of the school's administrators must be condemned.

The porn-thesis<sup>2</sup> controversy needs to be interpreted with a multidisciplinary outlook. In the following pages, this case will be analyzed from the peculiar viewpoints of philosophy and political economy. The history of intellectual freedom will be revisited in order to get a sense of its place in human advancement. Additionally, potential dynamics within the Turkish higher education system will be investigated in an effort to explore the political economy behind the university's decision to take punitive action against the three professors.

## **Arguments**

The Office of the President at Bilgi University rationalized the university's decision to fire three professors on the grounds that the thesis 'did not contain any scientific, artistic or academic quality, and its preparation and evaluation in a university is inappropriate ethically and professionally' (Hurriyetport, 2011).<sup>3</sup> Conservative columnist Fatma K. Barbarosoğlu interprets the thesis as a twisted manifestation of the disturbance of seculars from the re-emergence of conservatism in Turkey. In order for this conflict to be resolved, conservatives should remain distant to the discourse. Because there is a fierce ideological competition between conservative and liberal segments of the Turkish society, inclusion of the conservatives into the debate would stimulate a new *we-they* perception among the secular elements, and distract them from examining the issue from a moral angle. 'I do believe that if the nation's more conservative ranks can place a distance between themselves and this issue,' writes Barbarosoğlu, "those in the 'other neighborhood' will be able to have more successful debates amongst themselves about the meaning of this all. The moment the conservatives enter the debate, people's natural instinct is to 'protect their own ranks', which skews the entire dialogue" (Barbarosoğlu, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

A media studies professor in Izmir, Oğuz Adanır argues that the fact that the student gave an interview to a magazine about his thesis points to his insincerity all along. He argues that examining academic freedom is the business of academicians, not students. ‘If’, Adanır says, ‘the student turns out to be an academician some day, then he can question the extent of academic freedom’ (Türker, 2011).<sup>5</sup> This approach is parallel to that of Murat Belge who teaches literature at Bilgi. Belge finds an undergraduate student’s aspiration to explore the limits of freedom in his university inappropriate. He writes that ‘a student who is at the thesis phase in his studies is not at a place to examine such things. Writing a graduation thesis means you are the one being examined. His capacity to graduate would be examined by his professor. [...] If a student wants to see the scope of academic freedom, he can do it in any other field than porn’ (Belge, 2011).<sup>6</sup>

The argument that a student is not at a position to examine the limits of freedom in academia is a product of a condescending and autocratic mind that believes himself to be holding a monopoly on intellect. Scholarship requires welcoming ideas from all people regardless of their academic titles. An undergraduate student may as well produce ideas that are useful for scientific inquiry. Examining whether there is a limit to academic freedom by presenting a porn video as a thesis is an idea in its own right. From Kyoto to Sorbonne, Harvard to ETH Zurich, even the finest colleges in the world that expand the frontiers of knowledge often utilize undergraduate students in their research, both in the capacities of research conductors as well as idea generators. Just like a student is free to explore the scope of intellectual liberty in academia, he is free to choose his research subject as long as his thesis committee finds it compatible with academic standards.

Opposition to the porn-thesis is dominated by emotional responses driven by a subjective sense of morality, not by rational thinking formed by knowledge. For instance, Prof. Belge ‘concludes from the discourse on the subject that there is no hypothesis inside the thesis’ even though he openly admits he has not seen the thesis. From this speculative inference, he goes on to argue that the lack of hypothesis in the

thesis points out that the student ‘did not understand what thesis writing is about’ (Belge, 2011).<sup>7</sup> He then goes on to explain how a thesis needs to have a hypothesis and a test that examines its validity. Albeit correct epistemologically, this analysis is still a pure speculation based on an unsubstantiated assumption that the thesis did not contain a hypothesis.

A Professor of Architecture at Istanbul’s Kültür University, Hakkı Yırtıcı contends that the subject thesis cannot be considered as porn, because it was guided by emotions that do not exist in professional adult film industry:

The female student accepted the offer to take place in the movie, but the first male student who was going to act backed out at the last minute. Then, when the female actor was introduced to two other male actors, she refused to play with them, because she didn’t like them. Finally, she felt better about the third male actor after acquainting with him over a cup of tea, and agreed to participate. This shows that the process was determined by emotions. It is a stark contrast to a porn movie in which professional actors [...] simply reproduce the lust demanded by the consumers of their product. As a person who produces and acts in porn movies, Turkish pornstar Şahin K. said ‘this is not porn, this is homework’. And as an academician who knows about homeworks, I concur. This is homework, not porn (Yırtıcı, 2011).<sup>8</sup>

Yırtıcı notes that the three professors who approved the thesis’ proposal deserve acclamation just like the student who carried it out. A good scholar has to have the heart and open-mindedness to control his ego in his relationship with his students. He explains that “homework is a form of power struggle between two parties. Deep inside, the student who prepares it is upset at the professor who makes him do it. He wants to stretch the limits, and rebel against the compelling teacher. Professor, on the other hand, wants the homework to remain within the guidelines, because if it doesn’t, he feels like his authority is being challenged. [...] A good educator is the one who welcomes this challenge” (Yırtıcı, 2011).

Positivism is the prevalent intellectual current in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century scholarship. In contemporary science, the room for a social construct like morality is minimal just as involvement of sentimentality in research compromises reliability. The business of university is to avoid, not to make, normative judgments on scholarly investigations. Porn-making is a perfectly legitimate subject of study in the field of visual arts just as documentary-making or photography. A common declaration by 600 students who accused Bilgi administrators of suppressing the freedom of thought was to this point:

Research topics cannot be restricted in academia. The role of an academic advisor is to evaluate the topic with respect to the field of study and guide the student so he produces within academic standards, not to censor his topic. For a video with sexual content to be a ‘porn movie’, it has to target an audience, be designed to arouse it, and distributed and exhibited for the purpose of making money. On the other hand, a graduation thesis in the field of visual communications design in photography and video is an experimental or critical research on the presentation, aesthetics and techniques in the field of adult movie making. Pornography can be a legitimate subject of analysis in the field of visual communications design just like it has been in other disciplines across the world (Deliklitaş, 2011).<sup>9</sup>

The thesis at Bilgi University cannot be treated as porn so long as it remains within the confines of academics, and is not being sold for commercial purposes. Because it was not constructed to serve any monetary purposes, it should have been protected under the principles of freedom of expression and academic immunity, which we propose in this article to be legislated internationally. Remarks of the three academics that lost their jobs due to the thesis confirm that they did not perceive the thesis as a porn piece: We ‘failed the student because of the conceptual and applicative insufficiency of his thesis, not because of his subject’ (Universitehaber, 2011).<sup>10</sup>

The thesis at Bilgi may not be porn, but it is about porn, and it brings forth some complications. Hypothetically, if a person obtains a copy of the tape, and sells it in the commercial market for any value in the future, that person would then be in violation of the intellectual copyright laws just like a person who published a PhD dissertation as a

commercial book without the consent of the author would be. That would also be the point that the thesis video turns into “porn”, which would incriminate the person who sells it as an illegal distributor of pornographic materials. However, with the purpose the thesis is being prepared for and the way it is currently reserved, the student who prepared it cannot be considered as a commercial distributor of a porn tape. If he wants to prevent any misuses of his thesis in the future, he can simply exercise his right to demand his thesis to be removed from the school’s library stacks. On a well-known – and controversial- case, this was an option exercised by Alan Greenspan who had New York University remove his PhD dissertation from the stacks of Bobst Library in 1987 when he assumed the role of the Chairman of the US Federal Reserve (McTague, 2008).<sup>11</sup>

The fact that the Bilgi thesis is porn-related shifts the discourse surrounding it to a moral ground from the sphere of intellectual freedoms. It results in the thesis’ treatment as an act of social provocation rather than a scholarly investigation. While academia is not detached from society, the very nature of its work (knowledge creation) requires a higher degree of freedom than what is typically granted to the society at large. In both natural sciences that relies on proof, and social sciences that builds on persuasion; dissociation of mind from constraints like morality, politics or economics is a prerequisite of dialectic and rhetoric used in these fields, respectively. In order to conduct their research without any fear of persecution, people performing academic work must be legally shielded against non-academic influences just like the diplomats or politicians are with their respective immunities. In a ruling in *Adler v. Board of Education*, the US Supreme Court remarked that:

...[W]hat happens under [the Feinberg Law] is typical of what happens in a police state. Teachers are under constant surveillance, their pasts are combed for signs of disloyalty, their utterances are watched for clues to dangerous thoughts. A pall is cast over the classrooms. There can be no real academic freedom in that environment. Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of the free intellect’ (*Adler v Board of Education*, 1952).<sup>12</sup>

Liberal columnist Yıldırım Türker remonstrates that the privilege of academic immunity is not appreciated even by many scholars in Turkey. He writes:

...[T]he most shaming side of this story is how some academicians hid behind the feminist ideology with a pure moralist outlook, and went on to apologize from the conservative world. Meanwhile, the fact that some lazy feminists oppose all kinds of porn with a reasoning that it is an ‘exploitation of female body’ demonstrates how insulated our intellectual world is. This inertia of thoughts and ‘feminist status quo’ are being fed by those who memorize that female politicians should be supported no matter what their political stances are. [...] The fact that some people who had been defending democratization of academia, its liberation from YÖK [Turkish Higher Education Council] and unrestrained academic liberty are now taking a prohibitive position on the porn-thesis issue demonstrates how they gave up to this social hypocrisy. This [...] attempt to construct higher education on the mutually restrictive dynamics between [negative] rights and liberty [...] are an engine of conservatization. This is the country of intellectuals who shake their fingers to one another with the motto that ‘there is a limit to everything’, and [...] draw the boundaries of freedom without even imagining any freedom (Türker, 2011).<sup>13</sup>

Porn-thesis controversy embodies a predictable challenge that is linked to commercialization in academics. Bottom line for administrators at a private college is to sustain and further their school’s economic viability by attracting new students and retaining the current ones. Albeit justifiable from a business standpoint, this motivation can be troubling from the academic perspective when it works against the notion of intellectual freedom. When a tradeoff emerges to exist between commercial concerns and freedom of thought, the priority would likely be “liberty” for academicians but “business” for administrators. Mathematician Ali Nesin expressed his position on this clash of priorities at a letter that urged his administrators at Bilgi to resign:

Whether or not a porn movie can make a graduation thesis can only be discussed academically and ethically. [...] A university cannot be administered with concerns like ‘how do the parents react?’ or “what does the society say? I invite

those who brag about their 10 year Laureate experience to read Magna Carta with a 1,000 year tradition' (Bianet, 2011).<sup>14</sup>

## **Philosophical Outlook**

What does academic freedom entail? In an earlier conceptualization in 1969, American Association of University Professors described academic freedom as the

...[A]bsence of, or protection from, such restraints or pressures –chiefly in the form of sanctions threatened by the state or church authorities, or by the authorities, faculties or students of colleges and universities, but occasionally by other power groups in society– as are designed to create in the minds of academic scholars [...] fears and anxieties that may inhibit them from studying and investigating whatever they are interested in, and from freely discussing, teaching or publishing” (American Association of University Professors, 1969).<sup>15</sup> Shortly, academic freedom “signifies the intellectual autonomy of the members of the academic community –freedom of the faculty in research and teaching, freedom of the students in learning, and freedom of both from imposed conceptions of truth (Kadish, 1982).<sup>16</sup>

In a spectacular ruling in 1957, the US Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote “the essentiality of the freedom in the community of American universities is almost self-evident. No one should underestimate the vital role in a democracy that is played by those who guide and train our youth. To impose any strait jacket upon the intellectual leaders in our colleges and universities would imperil the future of our nation.[...] Scholarship cannot flourish in an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust. Teachers and students must always feel free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die” (Sweezy v New Hampshire, 1957).<sup>17</sup> While the US laws are not legally binding in the sovereign state of Turkey, their underlying principles are universally endorsable. The punitive response of the university administrators in the porn-thesis incident desecrated the most fundamental professional right of the professors who were laid off.

Stem-cell research controversy in the United States demonstrates that the place of morality in science, and the limits of scientific inquiry are debates that have not been settled in our time. While conservatives oppose stem-cell research on the grounds that freezing embryos throughout the process is a form of murder, liberals respond that embryo neither legally nor biologically constitute “human” yet, and research that can potentially end some of the worst and deadliest diseases like Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and cancer may be ended out of the findings of stem-cell research. Positions taken on the subject have been conspicuously plural among the local, state and federal governments, legists and legislators across the United States.

Philosophical underpinning of the detachment of academic thought from outside influences can be traced back to the emergence of three intellectual concepts: The idea of intellectual freedom, which was born in Greece, emerged in France with Renaissance, and ripened with the Enlightenment; the idea of academic autonomy, which arose in European colleges, and the idea of rights granted by the US Bill of Rights. The 15<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance was a “rebirth” (“renaissance” in French) of classical civilization and knowledge, and a reaffirmation of the philosophy of Plato (Merlan, 1947: 409).<sup>18</sup> In his interpretation of the achievements and significance of the ‘age of reason’, 18<sup>th</sup> Century German philosopher Immanuel Kant uttered

...Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if it is not caused by lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another (Kant, 1949: 132).<sup>19</sup>

The porn-thesis showcases a competition between moralist and positivist schools of thought. “Moral” thinking here refers to a thought process that involves non-epistemic phenomena, but not to “values” as used in the common language. While values should and will always be a part of science (for instance, what is called “academic standard” is in fact a set of values in science), the place of non-cognitive phenomena in scholarship is questionable at best. George Howard proposes a definitive distinction between “epistemic” concepts, which are cognizable such as honesty and

“non-epistemic” concepts, which are not detectable with cognition such as political ideology (Howard, 1985: 255).<sup>20</sup> Scientific research is to be built on epistemic concepts in order to earn universal applicability and reliability.

Mutual exclusiveness of morality and positivism derives from the incompatible ways of thinking and concluding in these two epistemologies (Figure-1 below). Positivist inquiry is an attempt to satisfy impersonal curiosity to investigate natural or social phenomena in order to make explanatory, testable, accumulative and nomological inferences about them. On the other hand, morality-based thinking produce non-predictive, non-accumulative, untestable and normative ideas that apply only to relationships between living things. Even though morality can impact human living positively, it cannot aid a scholar in expanding the frontiers of knowledge. As Aristotle noted 2,300 years ago, decisive dissociation of science from morality –if not from values– is congruent with the definitive characteristic of scientific knowledge: ‘*Science is the knowledge of everything that cannot be otherwise.*’

**Figure-1.** Differences between positivist and moralist inquiry

<u><b>Moralist Theory</b></u>	<u><b>Positivist Theory</b></u>
Norms →	Facts →
Values → Rightness	Data → Truth
Principles →	Method →
Discourse: Practical	Discourse: Theoretical

**Source:** Kurtines et al. (1990: 286)<sup>21</sup>

### **Political Economy of Academic Freedom in Turkey**

In Turkish higher education system, private colleges are private only in the sense that they are owned by private individuals rather than the state. These schools named *foundation colleges* can only be established by a non-profit organization, which means that their profits cannot be used for any purpose other than their future operations. This system was chosen for the purpose of curbing profit motivations of private

entrepreneurs who are believed to be inclined to raise their schools' prices, if they were allowed to retain profits. The system of non-profit colleges prevents high quality education to turn into a luxury available only for children of the wealthy, and to become a reason to jeopardize macroeconomic stability (increasing tuition rates contribute to inflation). In this structure, government assumes a regulatory, redistributive and sponsoring role in higher education. A government organ (YÖK, short for the "Institute of Higher Education" in Turkish) establishes performance guidelines for universities, brings forth policies such as a program of rotating employment for junior academicians across the country, and subsidizes the universities.

Alongside favorable outcomes, there are two major drawbacks of the idea of centralized management of higher education. Firstly, such a system lays the groundwork for politicization of higher education. YÖK's Director is appointed by the President out of a pool of candidates who are believed to run the country's higher education system in line with the policies and priorities of the ruling administration. Confirming secular concerns about the rise of political Islam, the current Director Yusuf Ziya Özcan who was appointed in 2007 by Turkey's first openly religious President Abdullah Gül overturned the constitutional ban on wearing headscarves in universities in 2010 (Seibert, 2010).<sup>22</sup> Secondly, centralized governance of higher education means placing the state in an authoritative position rather than a purely administrative one, and it diminishes operational and intellectual autonomy of universities. It doesn't take long for college administrators to realize that they have to maintain "good relations" with YÖK in order to operate smoothly. If they are in good terms with YÖK, the government would be more accommodating to demands of the university. Considering Turkey's current political climate, in which an increasingly authoritative conservative party is leading the way, it would be sensible to speculate that political ramifications played some part in Bilgi administrators' decision to play the guardian of morality in the porn-thesis incident.

The fact that professors were fired only after the student publicized the case with an interview at a magazine, which was six months after his thesis project was graded

and concluded, suggests that the administrators may have acted out of a political motivation. In its press release, the university announced that “*the Office of the President gives the priority to the protection of the reputation of Bilgi University students while welcoming reaction from the academic staff*” (Hurriyetport, 2011).<sup>23</sup> Responses of some parents whose children go to Bilgi confirm that the administrators’ concern about the school’s potentially tarnishing reputation is not unfounded. This is what Malawian historian Paul Zeleza calls the transformation of “development university” into a “market university”, in which “threats to academic freedom are [...] more economic” than anything else (Zeleza, 2003: 149).<sup>24</sup>

Such a motivation would not only be subordination of scholarship to economics and politics, but also a violation of the Magna Charta Universitatum signed by Bilgi University. Along with 720 other universities in 79 countries, Bilgi University signed the pact that was initiated by University of Bologna to establish and maintain high academic standards and freedom in the world. Bilgi administrators’ decision to lay off the professors who were involved in the controversial thesis violates the first of the four fundamental principles of the declaration:

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the demands of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988).<sup>25</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Opponents of the porn-thesis are mistaken in their attachment of the issue to the concept of negative freedom. Negative freedom refers to the freedom of a person “from” something. The porn-thesis is not promoted publicly in a way to violate the (negative) freedom of people from exposure to it. The thesis was stacked in the university’s library just like all other theses so that it can be utilized in future research.

Because universal academic standards require theses to be written documents even in the fields like archeology, anthropology, architecture or photography in which works are often based on visual documents, the video was stacked as an attachment to the actual written thesis at Bilgi. It was neither forcefully shown to anyone who would not want to see it, nor provided in such a way that anyone not related to it academically could access it. If Bilgi University's library is open to public and the university attracts a high traffic due to people who flock in the library to see the video, then the library administrators can decide to provide the video only to researchers who demonstrate their professional attachment to the issue. This, however, would be a purely administrative detail that has nothing to do with the philosophical or political economic analyses of the issue.

If the actors who took place in the video do not consent to the availability of the video to the public or the researchers –now or later-, they can simply exercise their right to demand the thesis be removed from the stacks of the library. Although consenting to participate in the porn-thesis suggests that no such opposition occur (at least at the time of its preparation), this right must be perceived to belong to every person who appears in the video. The right to privacy of the actors, however, should not challenge the intellectual property rights of the student who prepared the thesis. If an actor demands the withdrawal of the video from library stacks, but the thesis student insists to keep it available; then the dispute would need to be settled in court, which is another dimension of the case that has no relevance to the judgments made by professors and administrators discussed here.

The student who prepared the controversial thesis demonstrated a tricky curiosity to explore the boundaries of academic freedom he had been told to exist. His curiosity is the most primary element in all scientific expedition. Professors who approved his idea but failed his project took on the exact role that a good scholar is supposed to take. They welcomed the courageous attempt of exploration, but evaluated the final output according to its compliance with academic standards. The open-mindedness exhibited by these four people (and to a lesser extend the other four who

acted in the video) is essentially parallel to that of Galileo when he claimed that planets revolve around the sun, not the earth. His supposition, which was fatally contrarian to the popular belief in the intellectual climate of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century led the way to a paradigm shift in scientific thinking. Thanks to his courage, truth began to be searched by examining phenomena that were not believed to be God-given. The great value of iconoclastic courage stems from the convenience and safety of supporting prevalent mindset in a society. As a French postmodern philosopher once said, “most of the problems we face today stem from us, the Westerners’ reluctance to admit the possibility that there may be other rationalities than ours.”

Regardless of whether or not the porn-thesis is favored in the final account, it was an accomplishment in the sense that it revealed and possibly stretched the limits of academic freedom in Turkey. The fact that the project attracted substantial attention (support or fury) from a wide national audience, and made people to argue about the limits of academic freedom was a positive contribution to the intellectual capital in Turkey. As the history of philosophy tells us, those who provoke thought contributes to knowledge no less than others who advance it. This is the point behind the words of the conservative columnist Fatma K. Barbarosoğlu who suggested that “the greatest and deepest response to the ‘exaggerated sharing’ of the director who [...] produced the porn-thesis movie as a response to rising conservatism is to remain indifferent to it” (Barbarosoğlu, 2011).<sup>26</sup>

Contribution of the Bilgi student to academic freedom in Turkey is analogous to that of Lawrence Summers who caused a major controversy in 2005. During a speech at the prestigious National Bureau of Economics Research (NBER), Summers who was the President of Harvard University at the time argued that one of the reasons why women were outnumbered as scientific leaders was their “innate difference in aptitude” from men. The remarks prompted fury among the intellectuals across the globe. People from different parts of the United States and abroad expressed their angst over Summer’s remarks, and blamed him of sexism and bigotry (Bombardieri, 2005).<sup>27</sup>

Summers had to step down from his post about a year later in response to Harvard community's loss of confidence in his suitability as the President (Finder et al., 2006).<sup>28</sup>

However, over time, interpretations of Summer's behavior began to pluralize. More and more people began to approach his nerve-wracking comments from a Schumpeterian sense of "creative destruction." Summer's comments could have been a case of premeditated provocation for the sole purpose of releasing the topic from the walls of the ivory tower, and earning it national significance by attracting the attention of the mainstream media. He was not a sexist bigot, but in fact a scientific hero. For people (like me) who had firsthand exposure to Summer's agitative but also pragmatic personality, this theory sounded as realistic as the initial reaction given to him. Summers later confirmed that he was "trying to provoke discussion." A fellow Harvard economist Richard Freeman agreed:

A lot of people who absolutely disagreed with him were not irritated. He said again and again, 'I'm here to provoke you,'. He is very good at stimulating debate, but he cares deeply about increasing diversity in the science and engineering workforces, especially since we have many more women getting Ph.D.'s in science and engineering than ever before (Dillan, 2005).<sup>29</sup>

The porn-thesis conflict is an example of a common mistake that people form opinions before they gather information. The Bilgi student's thesis is a thesis about porn supplemented by a supporting video, not a porn piece presented solely as a thesis. Much like an economics thesis is comprised of a main text that announces the findings, and appendices that present the empirical data that led the researcher to those conclusions, this thesis is made up of a written text supplemented by a related video to support the hypothesis put forth inside the text. A thesis that includes porn is no less admissible as a research project than a thesis about porn. To date, seven theses about porn were prepared and passed in six Turkish colleges, including the Police Academy and Gazi University, both of which have conservative leanings in their approach to education (Aydemir, 2011).<sup>30</sup>

For scientific knowledge to further human progress, science has to be conducted under ethical, not moral, guidelines. Professional principles such as universal standards of research, teaching and writing must be embraced while a divisive, restrictive and preventive angle of morality needs to be confined to the private life. Discussing an academic matter on the grounds of morality, as Bilgi Administration did, is a disservice to scientific inquiry. While history provides a myriad of occasions in which what is considered scientific has been dismissed as reliable knowledge over time, morality is a worse base than free thought to guide the search for knowledge. Morality is too subjective, relative and vague to even be agreed on at a given time. What is considered moral in one person's mind can be immoral in another's in the very same society. For a professional who makes good living, stealing may be a sinful act, but for a jobless man who has to find money to feed his family, it is redistributive justice. 19<sup>th</sup> Century British philosopher John Stuart Mill wrote:

If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind. [...] When there are persons to be found, who form an exception to the apparent unanimity of the world on any subject, even if the world is in the right, it is always probable that dissentients have something worth hearing to say for themselves, and that truth would lose something by their silence. [...] Strange that they should imagine that they are not assuming infallibility, when they acknowledge that there should be free discussion on all subjects which can possibly be doubtful, but think that some particular principle or doctrine should be forbidden to be questioned because it is so certain, that is, because they are certain that it is certain (Mill, 1859: 29).<sup>31</sup>

## Notes

1. Yıldırım Türker, "We Are All Pornographers," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 10, 2011.
2. In this article, the term "porn-thesis" is used as a short form of "porn-related thesis", but not as an acknowledgment of the thesis to be "porn".
3. Hurriyetport, <http://www.hurriyetport.com/news/117/ARTICLE/27363/2011-01-07.html>
4. Fatma K. Barbarosoğlu, "Abartılı Paylaşım ve Porno Film ile Mezuniyet Tezi [Exaggerated Sharing and Graduation Thesis with a Porn Movie]," *Yeni Şafak*, January 7, 2011.

5. Türker, 2011.
6. Murat Belge, "Porno-II," *Taraf*, January 15, 2011.
7. Belge, 2011.
8. Hakkı Yırtıcı, "Porno Ödev [Porn Homework]," *Radikal* daily, January 9, 2011, Radikal 2 supplemental section.
9. Murat Deliklitaş, "Bilgi'de Öğretim Görevlilerine Destek Protestosu [Protests at Bilgi to Show Support to the Fired Professors]," *Radikal* daily, January 10, 2011, Turkey section.
10. Universitehaber.com web portal, "Görevden Alınan Profflar Konuştu [Fired Professors Spoke Up]," [http://www.universitehaber.com/article.php?article\\_id=12272](http://www.universitehaber.com/article.php?article_id=12272)
11. Jim McTague, "Dr. Greenspan's Amazing Invisible Thesis," *Barron's*, March 31, 2008.
12. *Adler v Board of Education*, 342 U.S. 485 (1952)
13. Türker, 2011.
14. "Ali Nesin Bilgi Üniversitesi Yönetimini İstifaya Çağırıldı [Ali Nesin Urged Bilgi University's Administrators to Resign]," *bianet.com*, <http://bianet.org/bianet/ ifade-ozgurlugu/127009-ali-nesin-bilgi-universitesi-yonetimini-istifaya-cagirdi>
15. American Association of University Professors, "Academic Freedom and Tenure," 1969.
16. Sanford H. Kadish, Church-Related Law Schools: Academic Values and Deference to Religion, 32 *J. Legal Educ.* 161, 166 (1982).
17. *Sweezy v New Hampshire*. 354 U.S. 234 (1957)
18. Philip Merlan, "Form and Content in Plato's Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 8-4 (1947), 406-430.
19. Immanuel Kant, *What is Enlightenment?* (1949), 132.
20. George S. Howard, "The role of values in the science of psychology," *American Psychologist* 40 (1985) 255.
21. Derived from William M. Kurtines, Mildred Alvarez & Margarita Azmitia, "Science and Morality: The Role of Values in Science and the Scientific Study of Moral Phenomena," *Psychological Bulletin* 107/3 (1990) 286.
22. Thomas Seibert, "Headscarf Ban Fizzles out in Turkey," *The National*, October 13, 2010. <http://www.thenational.ae/news/worldwide/europe/headscarf-ban-fizzles-out-in-turkey?pageCount=0>
23. Hurriyetport, <http://www.hurriyetport.com/news/117/ARTICLE/27363/2011-01-07.html>
24. Paul T. Zeleza, "Academic Freedom in the Neo-Liberal Order: Governments, Globalization, Governance and Gender," *JHEA/RESA* 1 (2003): 149.
25. Magna Charta Universitatum. [http://www.magna-charta.org/pdf/mc\\_pdf/mc\\_english.pdf](http://www.magna-charta.org/pdf/mc_pdf/mc_english.pdf)
26. Barbarosoğlu, 2011.
27. Marcella Bombardieri, "Summers' Remarks on Women Draw Fire," *Boston Globe*, January 17, 2005, Local News section.
28. Alan Finder, Patrick Healy & Kate Zernike, "President of Harvard Resigns, Ending Stormy 5-Year Tenure," *New York Times*, February 22, 2006, US/Education section.
29. Sam Dillan, "Harvard Chief Defends His Talk on Women," *New York Times*, January 18, 2005, National section. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/18/national/18harvard.html>
30. Bülent Aydemir, "Polis Akademisi'nde de Porno Tez Hazırlandı [A Porn Thesis Was Prepared in Police Academy, Too]," *Haberturk*, January 13, 2011.
31. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

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