

Academic Civility and Questioning Motives

Edward Langerak, St. Olaf College

John Rawls has famously argued that civility calls for self-imposed restraints in our public square debates over coercive legislation.^[1] Civic respect, he says, calls for us to avoid using arguments that cannot be backed up by public reason, that is by considerations we reasonably believe all those affected by the legislation can reasonably accept. By using only such arguments, I convey to you that I will avoid using my freedom to unfairly restrict yours, and thereby this sort of civic respect has moral as well as prudential dimensions.

Elsewhere^[2] I have argued that something like Rawls's proposal should be accepted, even by those religious believers, both conservatives and liberals, who insist that their politics must be integrated with their theology.^[3] Thus I had to raise and reply to the important point made vigorously by them that such a restriction would violate their freedom of religion and would require them to bracket central elements of their identity and outlook, including ones that they firmly believe are necessary and helpful in an otherwise naked public square. In this paper I argue for an analogous civility in most campus debates, namely, that we should impose upon ourselves a restriction against publicly questioning each other's motives. (I should perhaps admit that my institution is just now recovering from a heated debate over a controversial staffing plan.)

"Civility" associates with categories like etiquette, manners, politeness, courtesy, protocol, propriety, and decorum, though it cannot be equated with any of them. All of the latter are culturally relative and, in the details, only sometimes carry a moral burden, though I think there are convincing arguments that violating the accepted norms of politeness, say, can be morally disrespectful.^[4] The Latin root for civility is the same as for city, the place where we meet strangers and cannot rely on friendship or familiarity to do what needs to be done. I like the anecdotal evidence that the handshake originated as a civil way of assuring others that one will not use one's sword on them. Much of what civility involves is context relative, but it is relative mainly to what is needed for the shared task or mutual endeavor. So the question of what civility requires in a given context or association is related to the question of what we are trying to accomplish together. Notice that the context may well include colleagues who are strangers or opponents, so we cannot rely on affection, friendship, or familiarity to set boundaries; civility is something we bring to the context, not necessarily something elicited from it.

Notice also that civility involves self-imposed (though, admittedly, also socially sanctioned) *restraints*; it has at least as much to do with what we will *not* do to each other as what we will do for each other. When we ask how a couple is getting along, and the answer is, "Well, they are civil to each other," we know that self-sacrificing affection is currently not likely to be the major motivator in the relationship. That civility has as much to do with forbearance as with active giving does not, of course, undermine its importance, since what we will *not* do or say to each other can keep us focused on our mutual tasks.

I refer primarily to debates within a given campus community, though I believe that much of what I say can easily be applied to other debates, such as those within professional societies, in academic journals, and between colleagues on different campus. I will not try to lay out a complete list of the endeavors that academics engage in together, but surely the list includes teaching, mutual inquiry into truth (or, at least, into what is reasonable or appropriate to assert in a given context), and shared governance. Academic virtues associated with these tasks include intellectual humility (which is not timidity but the confidence to learn by listening as well as one talks), honesty, courage, trustworthiness, and many others. It would not be difficult to show how civility interacts with these virtues in all three tasks, but I will focus on shared governance, since that is where politics cannot be avoided. Shared governance includes functioning as a community of discourse, more specifically as a deliberative democracy, while debating and voting on such central and politically charged matters as curriculum, academic policies, and personnel procedures and decisions, including grievance appeals.

So what should the community of discourse say about the nature of and restraints on the discourse itself? One answer is that (almost) anything goes, as long as everyone is honest and open. This view is analogous to what is sometimes called “radical inclusiveness” in the public square debates about coercive legislation. Indeed, the “consocial”^[5] view is that we respect each other’s particularity in the public square only when we are willing to offer and hear almost any type of consideration, especially the distinctly “non-public” ones. The problem with this inclusive honesty is that it can violate what Paul Weithman calls “the liberalism of reasoned respect.”^[6] Democracies must nurture the loyalty of those often or always in the minority on legislative debates. And the only thing that causes more legitimate resentment than having your comprehensive doctrine dismissed because it is distinctive is having my distinctive doctrine used to pass legislation that coerces you.

Also in the interest of minimizing legitimate but unproductive resentment, I counter the “open honesty” position regarding public academic debates by proposing a self-imposed restriction, namely, that we not publicly question each other’s motives, in particular, to impugn them. “Impugn” connotes “attack as unworthy,” so I’m referring to public efforts to expose motives that one believes others will regard as inappropriate, if not selfish or even evil. I do not oppose making private judgments, and I do not refer to private gossip (except to note that e-mail leaks). I also do not discuss publicly praising an opponent’s motives, though inflated praise, like that in the U.S. Senate, is often taken ironically, and I think it is better not even to raise the question, especially since questioning motives is so often done as a way of impugning them. Moreover, I do not generalize to all public debates or even to all academic debates. It may be that political civility (to say nothing of political reality) sometimes permits politicians to impugn each other’s motives, and motive judging often is required for juries and judges. Members of academic grievance committees may and sometimes must raise questions about a defendant’s or accuser’s motives; my restriction would apply only to openly impugning another committee member’s motives.

One possible reason for not impugning motives during academic debates is simply an application of the virtues of honesty and trustworthiness. If we know that we are frequently wrong when judging motives, we should avoid it, just as honest folk avoid using unreliable sources in public disputes. Can we trust our accuracy when judging motives? I wish I could claim that we generally cannot, but the evidence seems mixed. Evidence includes psychologist Peter Wason’s fascinating and well-known research from the 1960’s.^[7] Impressed with Karl Popper’s claim that falsifiability is central to doing science, Wason did experiments to find out how well ordinary humans do at reasoning about falsification. For example, he would show people four cards, as follows:

D F 3 7

Under the assurance that each card had a letter on one side and a numeral on the other, he asked them which cards they would have to turn over to verify or falsify the hypothesis that “If a card has a **D** on one side, it has a **3** on the other.” Since the hypothesis is that **D** is a sufficient (but not necessary) condition for **3**, the correct answer is **D** and **7**, but most people choose **D** only or **D** and **3**. Only 5-10% of people get it right. (Even students who have had a logic course do poorly; and notice that they cannot be interpreting “**D** implies **3**” as “**D** implies **3** and **3** implies **D**” or else they would select all four cards.) These results fed into a more general dismay about how poorly people reason, even about non-abstract and very important matters. Evolutionary epistemologists began suspecting that bad reasoning and error is quite consistent with, even conducive to, reproductive success (and thereby survival value). However, before we decide we are hard-wired for mistakes (which would be a self-referentially suspicious move anyway), we should note that when Wason’s letters and numbers are replaced with certain types of real-world examples, ordinary people turn into hard-nosed logicians. For example, when asked which people a bouncer in a bar should check to enforce the rule, “If drinking beer, then you must be at least 18 years old,” almost everyone checks (1) the age of the young-looking beer-drinker and (2) the contents of the 16-year-old’s glass but not (3) the age of the Coke drinker nor (4) the content of the 30-year-old’s glass. Interestingly, mere concreteness does not do the trick: the

hypothesis “A person eating hot chili also drinks cold beer” (using analogous conditions) yields as many mistakes as the cards. The point is that we seem to reason rigorously in situations of possible cheating or contract breaking.

Under the plausible assumption that reasoning about cheating is epistemologically similar to suspecting a bad motive, it is possible that we are quite good at the latter; we may be hard-wired to be better at seeing through one another than at seeing one another through. We may have factory-installed equipment for efficiently impugning motives, and St. Paul's *agape* that “bears all things, believes all things, and hopes all things” may be one of those fairly new-fangled accessories that culture tries to bolt on later, with mixed success. At any rate, the above research makes me reluctant to use unreliability as my justification for avoiding motive mongering. On the other hand, in the evolution of the human race, when our ancestors made decisions about whether the motives of others were suspect, false negatives would likely be more costly than false positives; so it is plausible that we are prone to think too negatively when judging motives. In my experience, at least, people with a penchant for motive-questioning tend to judge low rather than high. Maybe that is why academia seems to be so full of articulate paranoia, especially in hard times. The upshot is that the reliability consideration probably yields a yellow light for judging motives out loud, not a red one or a green one.

I will now give a practical and a moral reason for avoiding motive impugning during academic debates. The practical one is that it tends to lead the debate into undecidable deadends that are as lengthy, heated, and intense as they are unnecessary. I will return to this point. The moral reason is that the impugning of opponents' motives implies that they cannot be trusted in working on our shared tasks, and this form of uncollegiality is disrespectful and usually morally wrong. To imply that colleagues cannot be trusted to pursue the common good is to devalue their contribution to the public conversation and their membership in the community of discourse. Softening this claim by adding, “at least on *this* issue,” is off-set by the fact that such devaluing tends to get generalized; besides, it is on *this* issue that the opponent wants to be part of the community of discourse. Most ethical outlooks can provide many moral reasons for avoiding such devaluing. I regard these points as fairly obvious, so I will not belabor them but will consider objections to letting them be decisive.

One might object that there may be instances when devaluing the contribution and collegial status of another is morally appropriate. Perhaps a particular colleague or faction of colleagues simply cannot be trusted to pursue the common good, at least until their motives are unmasked and they are confronted with their hidden agenda. Here is a typical example, from a well-known writer in and about the academy: “The claim to objectivity, truth, and principles that transcend history and power may be comforting to neoconservative spokespersons, but, in reality, the discourse of such groups is nothing more than a rhetorical mask that barely conceals their own highly charged, ideological agenda.”^[8] The context makes it clear that their agenda is maintaining their own power. This comes from a footnote in an article that call for “forms of collegiality and community forged in social practices [linked to] larger social struggles.”^[9]

An obvious challenge to this objection is to note the arrogance of thinking that only one's opposition is susceptible to hidden agendas masquerading as objective truth. This challenge is met by post-modern wholesale suspects, who see publicly announced suspicion not as devaluing but as a realistic attitude toward all participants in campus debates: to think that academic debates are or should be ideal conversations in a deliberative democracy in which everyone should feel welcomed and included as we mutually inquire into truth and and the common good is an enlightenment fantasy, or hangover. We are all members of special interest groups committed to our own power agendas, and only bad faith prevents us from realizing that our appeals to sweet reason reduce to propaganda techniques. It is more honest and more productive if we air and argue about our reasons and our motives, within parliamentary rules, of course, and then simply vote. Since deep hermeneutical suspicion is a central part of some colleagues' comprehensive doctrine, they believe it is central to their interpretation of and participation in academic debates.^[10] Indeed, their integrity requires that they

honestly unmask pretenses. In fact, some neo-Marxists might go so far as to say that letting considerations of civility prevent polarization is counter-revolutionary and prevents the development of new alliances necessary to win important social struggles.

I do not think that we can reply to the above objection by asserting that its proponents, in so far as they engage in sheer power fights rather than in mutual inquiry, have simply removed themselves from our mutual endeavor, and that the issue for us is analogous to that of how one copes with unruly guests at a dinner party or book discussion. For one thing, some of my best friends and closest colleagues are practitioners of the hermeneutics of suspicion, and, in any case, in the academy they are not guests but co-hosts. Moreover, since my own Augustinian views about how our disordered loves can have distorting epistemological effects, I have to take seriously the post-modern doubts about enlightenment hopes for ideal inquiries in the cool of dispassionate campus afternoons. Of course, most Augustinians moderate their epistemological suspicions with a doctrine of natural law or common grace, as well as with the intellectual humility to admit that they themselves do not escape biases and thus have something to learn from the various sides in a mutual inquiry. Although such moderation can often be found in reflective post-modern suspects, they still tend to think it is naive to give up the unmasking of hidden motives; one simply must do it carefully, and perhaps in the sort of understanding way that avoids laying on guilt trips.

Possibly there is common ground here: I think we should affirm the value of having our motives interrogated. We should simply assert that it is a matter of when and where: it is appropriate in small and safe (but, importantly, diverse) groups of trusted colleagues where, if the forum is not therapeutic, or something approaching a Habermasian ideal speech situation, it at least is not adversarial in the way that public forums so often are (if for no other reason than the need to vote within a strictly limited time on politically charged matters).

My main reply to the great suspects returns to my practical point, though it has indirect moral implications. I begin with a rhetorical move: look at the model for faculty meetings that the above objectors project as the alternative to deliberative democracy. Are you sure you want it? More importantly, what if even the suspects could accomplish their legitimate goals without it? The practical point is that nobody needs it. By discussing “interests served by an argument or policy proposal” or “consequences flowing from a given decision,” rather than motivations behind making them, one can make all or most of the relevant points while avoiding most of the conversational costs of impugning motives. These costs include lengthy digressions into undecidable deadends that generate heat without light. I admit that intentions and motives often come together (e.g. “they are trying to do well by doing good”) and that we sometimes use the terms interchangeably. Still, we can often distinguish persons’ intentions (*what* they are doing, e.g. raising admission standards) from their motives (*why* they are doing it, e.g. the other-regarding motive of improving the educational environment, or the self-regarding motive of making their work easier). In any case, we can avoid talk about either greedy motives or self-serving intentions and simply point out that certain interests are being served and others ignored or overridden, and that a given decision has certain predictable effects. I grant that there is sometimes a very thin line between “You are merely trying to avoid time-consuming work with needy students,” on the one hand, and “The effect of your proposal would be lower enrollment by students who need us the most,” on the other. But the thinness of the line supports my case; the discussion can cover much the same relevant points without motive talk. Of course, we may know--even secretly hope--that listeners will draw certain conclusions about motives, but that does not erase the line. Rather, it simply points to the wisdom of that old Puritan proverb, “God loveth adverbs”;^[11] it is not just *what* we do that matters, it is *how* we do it. And how we talk about our colleagues is the essence of academic civility, which is conducive to accomplishing our shared tasks. Thus the practical point that we can better accomplish our goals while avoiding costly fights yields an indirect moral obligation for all those who accept the responsibility to pursue the common good.^[12]

[1] Rawls conveniently summarizes his view in the introduction to the paperback edition of *Political Liberalism* (Columbia University Press, 1996). Rawls himself, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, restricts the restriction to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice.

[2] "A Christian Argument for Political Self-Restraint," conference on Cultivating Citizens, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, October 29, 1999.

[3] Such as Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Religion in the Public Square* (co-authored with Robert Audi [Rowman & Littlefield, 1997]) and most of the authors in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. Paul Weithman (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

[4] See Sarah Buss, "Appearing Respectful: The Moral Significance of Manners," *Ethics* 109/4 (July, 1999), 795-826.

[5] Wolterstorff, etc.

[6] Op. cit., 33-34.

[7] Wason's work is routinely discussed by introductory psychology texts, such as David Myers' *Psychology* (Worth Publisher, 4th ed, 1986), 328. My discussion here borrows from Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (Norton, 1997). 336-37.

[8] Henry A. Giroux, "Liberal Arts Education and the Struggle for Public Life: Dreaming about Democracy," *The Politics of Liberal Education*, eds. Darryl Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Duke University Press, 1992), 141.

[9] Op. cit., 140.

[10] After I gave a version of this talk on campus, a good friend and colleague defended this view as his jaundiced but realistic reaction to several decades of engaging in campus debates.

[11] Discussed by Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard U. Press, 1989), 224.

[12] I thank John Barbour and Eric Nelson, as well as the other members of the 1998-99 Boldt Faculty Seminar, for helping me think through this issue. This paper was part of my Melby Lecture at St. Olaf College, April 13, 1999, and I thank members of the audience for pushing me on some of these points, especially Gordon Marino, Matt Rohn, and Edmund Santurri. I also read it at the 1999 annual meeting of the Minnesota Philosophical Society, October 9, 1999, and I thank my commentator, Stephen Chilton, for his perceptive criticism. Finally, my colleague Charles Taliaferro has given me advice on an earlier draft and has also always been a model of academic civility.

As read at the annual meeting of the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, March 27, 2003, San Francisco.