315. Academic Discussion and the Vulnerable Student

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"You might have come to college hoping for the kind of late-night philosophical debates your parents speak fondly about from their college years" (pp. 196-197). This sentence, with its troubling "might" (why would someone indifferent to late-night philosophical debates want to come to college?) is from *Try to Love the Questions: From Debate to Dialogue in Classrooms and Life*, a recent book of advice to undergraduate students. The author, Lara Hope Schwartz, continues by scolding her young would-be intellectual: "No one owes you a chance to debate them nor an explanation why they won't…. Respect people's boundaries."

A few pages later, Schwartz addresses the student on the receiving end of unwanted discussion. Schwartz is concerned that this student might worry that his urge to flee from his debate-pressing classmate is unworthy of an apprentice academic at a university. "You are the manager of your own time," she reassures him. "There is no one on this green Earth with the power to make you debate them" (p. 205). Schwartz instructs the unwilling student that while "vigorous dialogue" is wonderful, it is also dangerous, for "mental health challenges can happen any time" (p. 206). One must first of all look after one's wellbeing. ("Your capacity to love questions tomorrow depends on taking care of yourself today.")

What a dispiriting an account Schwartz has given us of university life. Schwartz is right, of course, that you shouldn't pester someone who'd rather not engage with you or engage with you on that particular topic. Perhaps there are times this point should be made to specific people, but does it really need to be insisted upon? Schwartz, it seems, would have young would-be intellectuals scared of being disciplined should they try to engage someone in discussion without obtaining consent first.

Schwartz does not spurn debate as a part of the university experience, but she values dialogue much more highly and would have debate yield to dialogue whenever possible. I agree with her about the shortcomings of debate, but at least debate is, or feigns to be, about getting some matter right. Dialogue, by contrast, is about understanding and appreciating each other and learning where the other is coming from and why he thinks and values as he does. Dialogue is happy to leave inquiry into the matter at hand right where it was. What matters is that we get to know each other.

Better than either dialogue or debate, I'd say, is discussion, critical discussion. Both debate and dialogue might figure as stretches within a discussion, but the discussion is focused on understanding the matter at hand, not on understanding each other; and, unlike debate, discussion resists being used to score points.

You and I, I hazard, came to university precisely in search of late-night philosophical discussions—whether conducted late at night, over lunch or in the classroom. You are likely as saddened as I am by the appearance of a guide to university that tells the enthusiastic discusser to knock it off. It might not be surprising that a contemporary author addressing students takes the side of the vulnerable young person who could need counselling after finding themselves in a debate. But it does indicate where we stand.

I received my doctorate in 1991, during the last days of the most recent spell of academic philosophy pursued as a blood sport. Part of the goal in philosophical discussion when conceived as a blood sport is to humiliate one or more participants, to show not just that someone is mistaken but also that he is an idiot. Professors who engaged in philosophy as blood sport attempted to prove not just their colleagues to be idiots, but the authors of the papers they assigned in their classes and visiting speakers, as well. Biddable students endeavoured to show that a classmate or two was an idiot. On occasion, a professor would seek to show one or another student to be an idiot. This was not a proud time for academic philosophy.

I would note that even at the height of philosophy as blood sport, it was nonetheless a minority pursuit. Very few professors and students engaged in it. It did happen, though; and, distasteful as it was, for those given to it, it came with a little thrill. And because it could happen, out of nowhere, that someone would tear into you, most of us students were a little more reserved about participating in discussion than we wanted to be or should have been.

Happily, by the late 1990s, philosophy was hardly ever pursued as blood sport anymore. Blood-sport disappeared because students and professors objected to the hurt feelings it caused and its general unpleasantness. Many said that the atmosphere of predation was turning women students and professors off and should no longer be tolerated for just that reason. It turned many men off, as well, though perhaps not in such proportion.

We can be glad that combative discussion, along with the intention to expose others as stupid, does not mark academic philosophy these days. But we cannot be entirely happy with the reasons for its demise. More significant than being unpleasant is philosophy-as-blood-sport's inconsistency with academic goals. Seeking to belittle others does not advance the quest to understand the matter at hand. The serious problem is that engaging in combat derails the discussion, bringing it to serve purposes unconnected to academically sound pursuits such as creating theories and finding answers.

Making things about feelings—or, worse, about the feelings of women or other sub-groups—alienates us from the academic mission. When the purpose for which people gather at a university takes a backseat to the emotional health of vulnerable students, even sincere desires to inquire into the world turn out to be suspect and must be monitored. We cannot be surprised that a book intended to orient newcomers to university life cautions students to pay attention to the effects

their eagerness to participate in the life of the mind can have on their classmates. We cannot assume that everyone here cares to have late-night philosophical discussions, even though “here” is a university.