

Being Emotional Is Not an Argument

Discourse, especially in schools, is miserable these days. As Randall Smith, the Scanlan Professor of Theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, argues, there are only three options when it comes to uncomfortable topics, “Non-judgmentalism, furious indignation, or ironic detachment.”

How he [describes](#) his experiences teaching at the college level goes a long way to explain the various examples of absurd college discourse that have been the national focus lately:

“My experience with students is that as much as they say that no position is any more true than any other, they are no more willing to tolerate things they consider ‘unfair’ or ‘unjust’ than those who profess a belief in objective moral truth. Their insistence that things be done ‘right,’ absent any defensible account of ‘rightness,’ merely confirms in them the conviction that all such demands are merely expressions of a person’s will or desire. Having systematically insulated themselves from every kind of rational argument, the result is that not only can they never lose an argument, they also can never win.

College students often have only two gears when it comes to public discourse: ‘non-judgmentalism’ and ‘furious indignation.’ In one gear, they proclaim endlessly that ‘this is just what I think,’ that they ‘don’t want to judge anyone else’ and that they ‘don’t want to tell anyone else what to do.’ And yet when they come upon some activity or expression they find unacceptable—usually something they have been taught to view as a sign of an unacceptable prejudice or bias—their response is loud and furious: a shrill protest of indignation.

The more students dismiss the resources of critical reason, the less faith they have in reasoned judgments. The less faith they have in reasoned judgments, the more likely they are to assume every decision they find offensive is based on ill will or gross stupidity, and the more indignant they are likely to be in their condemnations. The louder and more intractable the disputes between parties, the more those with less stomach for the fight will withdraw into postmodernism's 'ironic detachment': the shrug of the shoulders and the ubiquitous 'whatever.'

Allowing an ideological simulacrum of rational argument to continue to dominate public discourse—with its shrill assertion of self-righteous indignation, the 'unmasking' of one's ideological opponents, and the ironic detachment of those who have 'seen through' the whole illusion—will only destroy the possibility of a discussion that, with patience and good will, could be mutually illuminating."

One of his solutions requires a change in education, a move away from "critical thinking" to "logic and rhetoric". In other words, we need to resurrect the tried-and-true traditions of the West.

"It has become clear, for example, that we are suffering the tragic results of having cut logic and rhetoric from the standard college curriculum. When I say 'logic,' I'm not talking about modern 'symbolic logic,' which was an attempt to replace ordinary language with mathematical symbols. Nor am I talking about that diffuse, abstract thing called 'critical thinking.' We need the logic of ordinary language.

And then we need our students to understand the nature and character, the strengths and weaknesses, of classical rhetoric. We need them to distinguish good arguments from bad, valid inferences from invalid, and we need them to recognize various rhetorical appeals and appreciate them for

what they are or discount them for what they are not. A critical mass of the citizenry must once more come to recognize basic argumentative fallacies, value logical consistency, and prize the fine art of Socratic dialogue."

How true. If all arguments are to be grounded in emotion, we will never make progress as a society. Indeed, we'll likely regress rapidly as political discourse and decisions will ultimately rest not in what is logically best, but rather on the will to power. Whoever can manipulate emotions the best in order to fan the flames of voter passions will be the victor. And while it will initially have the feel of mob rule, there will be only a few who truly benefit.

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