

# *Friendly Persuasion: A Note on Depoliticizing the Classroom*

*Sapere Aude!*

Dare to Know!

Kant

## **Robert Hull**

In his essay “*Was ist Aufklärung?*” (“What is Enlightenment?”<sup>1</sup>) Immanuel Kant argues that a person who depends on others for opinions in moral, political, and religious issues is immersed in a kind of mental childhood. Kant claims that, among his fellow Konigsbergians, this intellectual nonage isn’t a matter of ignorance as much as it is one of mental sloth and a lack of courage<sup>2</sup> Kant’s essay identifies liberty of discussion, and the courage to use liberty, as sufficient conditions for the intellectual autonomy he identifies as *Aufklärung*. Significantly, he believed that the censorship he saw in his society was largely self-imposed. His contemporaries were all too ready to consent to ideological paternalism out of misplaced respect for authority. In his mind they failed to recognize the importance of discussion, debate, and disagreement to the development of autonomous human beings. To their detriment, they confused callow conformity with prudence and civic loyalty, and so lost the benefits that naturally accrue from spirited discussion. Kant’s dictum, *Sapere Aude*, urges us to develop our faculties, and thereby fulfill our potential as free, rational creatures, by participating fearlessly in the conversations shape our lives.

Kant’s concerns regarding intellectual maturity and the responsible use of freedom are just as relevant today as they were in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A crucial issue for all educators is how to balance the exercise of academic freedom with concerns about the politicization of the classroom. An intelligent solution to this problem can begin by thinking about the objectives and goals, in academe and beyond, of courses that have substantial moral, political, or religious content. Certainly one objective of such courses is to nurture in our students a capacity to think critically about moral and religious questions. That is, we want our students to learn habits of mind that are fundamental to institutions of higher

learning and to their being responsible citizens in a democracy. In my classes, this means learning to understand perspectives different from our own, and to withhold judgment about a particular outlook until it has been given a fair and accurate statement. It means being willing to submit one's own cherished perspectives to intense intellectual scrutiny and appraisal. Critical thinking skills also include a commitment to follow the arguments wherever they may lead, and to understand that few perspectives are without their idiosyncratic assumptions and weaknesses. Holding an opinion responsibly necessarily involves understanding its limitations as well as its strengths. We want to graduate, and a democratic society and the larger world desperately needs, students who have the critical capacities indispensable to participating in the great conversations that guide our lives.

There can be no doubt that all of the good that can come from classes that grapple with difficult issues is completely destroyed by a politicized classroom. By a "politicized classroom" I mean a classroom that has, in advance of any argument or discussion, a privileged ideology to which all members of a class are expected uncritically to conform their opinions.<sup>3</sup> Whether the pressure to conform the mind to an ideology comes from administration, a professor, or from students themselves, this tyranny of ideas is at cross purposes to the values, goods, and objectives that are essential to colleges and universities and to effective democratic citizenship. For example, imagine that this pressure comes from a professor. In such a case, the professor makes it clear, explicitly or implicitly, that success in their courses depends on accepting dogmatically perspectives she endorses. How will this affect the intellectual approach a student takes to the class? Rather than an exhilarating quest for a better understanding of oneself and the world, and the sharpening of those critical faculties that benefit most from such a quest, a student is tempted to think solely in terms of what pleases the person in power. Indeed, in such a classroom qualities that can be construed as human weaknesses become strengths and are thereby nurtured, most notably and sadly a willingness to compromise one's actual beliefs and values for mere expedience.

On the contrary, consider the benefits a student enjoys when a professor's pedagogy encourages a student to think for herself, to sift critically the thoughts and positions taken

by influential minds, and to reason for or against perspectives on the basis of logic and argument.<sup>4</sup> She learns, *inter alia*, the importance and difficulty of appraising fairly an argument or point of view. To come to terms with a point of view, assess it intelligently, and compare it with alternatives requires the student to employ all of her higher faculties. In this undertaking a student is challenged to put forth the mental effort that is necessary to cultivate her analytic abilities, her capacity for coherent and consistent reasoning, her facility for assimilating ideas and experience, and her capacity for creative thought. And all of this involves that first critical step, the struggle to create a fair and intelligent interpretation of the perspective in question, and the recognition that this isn't something to be done capriciously or carelessly. Simply recognizing the difficulty and significance of this exercise is in itself an invaluable experience, one that is likely to bring with it the concomitant values of intellectual humility and fairness. But all of this is possible only in a classroom where tolerance for open discussion, respect for the primacy of good reasoning and argument, and a willingness to engage in honest debate are prevailing pedagogical values.

Actions taken by administrators and academics who occupy positions of authority in a college or university can also create a politicized classroom. College presidents, academic deans, and trustees can affect the academic and intellectual culture of their institutions in countless ways. Decisions regarding mission statements, hiring and promoting faculty, the selection of courses offered or required, speakers invited to campus, and extracurricular opportunities for students have the potential to stifle or nurture a spirit of critical thinking and reasoned discourse in the classroom. When administrators make such decisions strictly on the basis of ideological correctness, rather than as an effort to foster in their community of learners a quest for a shared wisdom, the leaders of a college or university community inculcate the lazy habits of political acquiescence.<sup>5</sup> Students, who are often comparatively inexperienced and new to academe, can be highly impressionable, and some of the lessons they learn come from what happens on campus beyond the classroom. For this reason alone the public actions taken by the people who occupy positions of influence and power should square with the academic and intellectual values the community claims to celebrate.<sup>6</sup>

One might argue that, since institutions of higher learning usually have value-laden missions and mission statements, there is a place in them for some element of moral or intellectual rigidity, if not politicization. Certainly, an institution of higher education whose mission endorses specific religious and political values has a duty to use those values to guide the education of its students. Furthermore, students have a right to academic freedom, and this right has obligations as well. But the policies and practices that flow from these rights and duties should be viewed as expressions or manifestations of academic freedom. For a college or university to achieve its mission, and for all members of a community of learners to profit from a right of expression, they must use that academic freedom wisely and responsibly.

The kind of education our students receive has as much to do with intelligent pedagogy as it does with the specific ideals honored in a mission statement or in positions students decide to affirm. The manner in which a belief is acquired and held is just as important as the specific moral or religious content of that belief.<sup>7</sup> In a politicized classroom a student may learn to recite a catechism (whether secular or no), but she will not hold a living belief capable of animating her life. To paraphrase Mill, only when a perspective is freely and fearlessly discussed, challenged, and defended do we probe the grounds for holding it. When, in a discussion, we are called to defend a point of view, or to provide a reasoned explanation for it, we are made to come up with its ultimate rationale, its basic principles or grounds. In responding to a criticism, or when we are challenged to respond to an alternative perspective, we are afforded an opportunity to plumb its depths, so to speak. But only then can we recognize its real wisdom and meaning. Claims like ‘God is love,’ ‘love others as you would love yourself,’ or ‘property is theft’ have meanings that are not contained between the first and last letters of their propositional statement. They have this in common with icebergs: the greater part of what they are about is below the surface.

Without the critical reflection that is an essential aspect of open discussion and debate the ground for holding an opinion remains a mystery to its possessor, and its meaning is lost. This is precisely what is missing in a politicized classroom, a classroom where certain

ideas are given “rights of citizenship,” to quote Nietzsche, and so are admired, but not understood, because they are never freely discussed or critically assessed. In terms of content of belief, a person who adopts a perspective out of expediency or because of pressure or force is unlikely to have a belief or understanding that can withstand criticism or guide conduct. But that understanding is exactly what we should expect higher education to provide, and that is what our students will need to be effective citizens.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, a dogmatically held opinion is hardly even an opinion. If this is true, then colleges and university that are committed to specific religious or social/political tenets can effectively teach them only in an academic culture that values open discussion.

These reflections help us to understand the damaging effects of political correctness. By ‘political correctness’ I do not mean a specific set of moral, religious, or political opinions. Rather, I mean a widely shared agreement regarding moral, religious, or political opinions, where the accepted opinions are insisted upon at least in part through intellectual peer pressure. A person who dissents is not merely wrong, but intellectually and/or morally culpable, and so is greeted with disapprobation as well as disagreement. This is the form of politicization that students (with significant institutional enablers) are most likely to bring on themselves and their peers. Clearly, the chief destructive feature of political correctness is that it stifles debate.<sup>9</sup> But if it is true that free, frank, forthright discussion is a necessary vehicle for learning, then the expression of ideas that we might assume are false must play a helpful role in education.<sup>10</sup> Ideas that are seen not only as obvious, but also as morally obligatory, are the least likely to get called into question, and so it is our most cherished, foundational ideas that carry the greatest risk of superficial understanding. And so, paradoxically, the ideas that we are most likely to view as self-evident and as constitutive of how we see the world in moral and political terms that have the most to gain from interrogation. The expression of a heterodox viewpoint can be helpfully used as an opportunity to review and reconsider grounds that otherwise will eventually be lost. Challenges to the ideological status quo can be used helpfully as opportunities to search for an ampliative understanding of what we consider most familiar.<sup>11</sup>

Formulaic descriptions of viewpoints and perspectives whose difficult meaning we seek to understand in liberal arts education, and have, in name at least, become iconic cultural possessions, will not merely disappear in the absence of thoughtful and rigorous consideration. The complex and oftentimes ambiguous significance of profound religious and philosophical thought, having been reduced to truncated sound-bite iterations, will be replaced by whatever seems attractive and expedient to the speaker and her consumers, and thus will cynicism sail under a seductive, false flag. Like nature, Demagogues abhor a vacuum. How else are we to understand how crass consumerism can masquerade as Christianity, or militant extremism as Islam? Or, what is perhaps worst of all, given our own hard-won traditions, is how “extra legal rendition” (an Orwellian obfuscation if there was one) can pass as sound, pragmatic democratic foreign policy.

In a democratic society, Aristotle reminds us, the defining political values are equality and freedom.<sup>12</sup> Unlike authoritarian rule, where order is produced by force, in democracy the ends of political organization can be achieved only if the people share in ruling and being ruled. What this meant for Aristotle was that a democracy functions well only if the people adopt an ethos that includes respect for the rule of law, a willingness to accept the duties of citizenship, and possession of sufficient practical wisdom to make sound political decisions collectively. Thomas Jefferson and other early American democrats inevitably linked education with good citizenship, self-reliance, and societal prosperity.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, the critical abilities and habits of mind that students can develop in pedagogically sound courses that confront moral, political, and religious issues are invaluable to participating responsibly in the political process. Indeed, the educational ethos that we should strive to inculcate in our students, and the motivations and objectives of that ethos, approximate ably an ideal for mature and intelligent political debate beyond the classroom.

As educators, we are fortunate to have an opportunity to make a difference, and there are useful strategies for fostering academic freedom while avoiding politicizing the classroom. In my view it is useful read at least two or three prominent perspectives on a given issue. In an honors political philosophy class I recently taught, this meant no Karl

Marx without Adam Smith, no Milton Friedman without John Rawls, no Rousseau without Hobbes. The juxtaposition of jarringly different perspectives often serves to bring into relief essential aspects of those perspectives. Reading Mussolini after Jefferson taught us as much about democratic thought as it did fascism.<sup>14</sup> Regarding writing assignments, in the honors class students presented short papers with the understanding that their first responsibility is to provide a fair account of the perspective we are studying. We need to teach our students that it is a sign of a mature mind to look for what is compelling in a perspective (rather than immediately going for a weakness) or, failing that, what made the perspective influential. Our students need to understand that an excellent argument for a position we might reject is always better received than sloppy reasoning for a view we'd share. This approach allows our classes to experience spirited and informed discussions of controversial topics, whether it's social welfare, affirmative action, or the Patriot Act. Above all else, a professor should model in her own behavior the passion for argument, sound reasoning, and intelligent conversation that we seek to foster in our students. Nothing else would comport with respect for those "better angels" in our students' nature that it is our responsibility to nurture. Life is for learning, after all: *Sapere Aude!*

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<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, tr. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding intellectual freedom and enlightenment, Kant writes, "Nothing is required for this enlightenment, however, except freedom; and the freedom in question is the least harmful of all, namely, the freedom to use reason publicly in all matters." Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" p. 41

<sup>3</sup> This pressure to conform need not be overt and explicit. It can be a pressure that emanates from the overall momentum of a specific learning community's orthodox *ethos* and institutional goals.

<sup>4</sup> A revelation critical thought inevitably leads one to is how difficult it is to *define* critical thinking. In this paper I do rely on the reader to have some intuitions of her own on this matter. Nevertheless, I will attempt to say something regarding what I mean by non-dogmatic, reasoned thought in addition to what is implied by the above: It is energized by the project of explaining and justifying its foundations; it is always open to reflection of its own meaning; it considers a sympathetic understanding of opposing views a first virtue of interpretation; and, it considers *ad hominem* arguments, and similarly other fallacious or sophistical arguments, illegitimate means of discussion.

<sup>5</sup> An egregious example of this is an administration that attacks a professor for who references offensive language in the course of teaching a class that deals with racism or some other form of discrimination. The censorship of expression in such cases cannot help our students, and cannot help us, comprehend the mistakes and prejudices that permit racism to persist. Resisting and understanding bias requires frank,

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rational discussion that will sometimes invoke the language of prejudice. But when a professor is attacked for this what we have is merely a chilling censorship that will teach us nothing. We end up with a lazy and superficial conceit that language we don't like, but may not really understand, and have not thoughtfully criticized, won't be repeated in public.

<sup>6</sup> It is a commonplace that students possess highly sensitive hypocrisy detectors. But what is just as true, and just as worthy of consideration, is that they are also quick to recognize and celebrate decisions and actions taken that are nobly motivated.

<sup>7</sup> My views in this essay reflect the influence of such philosophers as Socrates, St. Thomas Aquinas and Supreme Court Jurists Oliver Wendell Holmes and Louis Brandeis. Above all, the ideas I express in this essay are given their most important theoretical articulation in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*. See especially: Mill *On Liberty*, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978) pp. 37-41.

<sup>8</sup> I doubt that in a politicized classroom a professor actually ever "converts" anyone. The development of one's outlook is more complicated than that. No student was ever "argued into" a perspective, in my view.

<sup>9</sup> Political correctness is, in my view, the *social* version of the politicized classroom. This social or institutional aspect to political correctness differentiates it from the politicization that is primarily the effect of pedagogical decisions made by the professor alone.

<sup>10</sup> This is one of several key insights in *On Liberty*, and the next line of reasoning is straight out of Mill's argument, altered only to address the concerns of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> There are rules and limits to this, of course. Members of a community of learners should not, for example, engage in abusive language. However, they should be prepared to explore why this condition is organic to a constructive, ongoing conversation.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Aristotle, *Politics* (New York: Modern Library, 1943) Bk. IV, chapter 4.

<sup>13</sup> In connection with the founding of the University of Virginia, Jefferson wrote: "We fondly hope that the instruction which may flow from this institution, kindly cherished, by advancing the minds of our youth with the growing science of the times, and elevating the views of our citizens generally to the practice of the social duties and the functions of self-government, may insure to our country the reputation, the safety and prosperity, and all the other blessings which experience proves to result from the cultivation of the general mind," Virginia Board of Visitors Minutes, 1821 ME 19:407.

<sup>14</sup> The democratic values of equality, freedom, the rule of law, and the primacy of human rights and the value of the individual person are best known, I am convinced, when they are compared with their fascist antipodes. For example, reading Mussolini argue passionately for the subservience of personal individuality to State objectives puts a Jeffersonian plea for limited government in a whole new light. Watching Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, having read a classic defense of individual liberty, like those of Paine, Thoreau, or Mill, makes the ecstatic expressions of fascist conformity in the film all the more disturbing. The interactions of these antithetical perspectives force us to think harder about fundamental issues. We are lead to ask, what is of ultimate value in the perspectives at hand? What made them compelling? What is taken for reality, for truth, in them? When these questions are raised, and we are work hard at answering them, we put ourselves in a position to gain authentic insights into what we are studying.