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Inquiry as Occupation

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Abstract: Honors educators must acknowledge and respect clear boundaries between the work they do in the classroom and the advocacy they support or engage in as private citizens. Public colleges exist to prepare citizens for life in a pluralistic, democratic republic, and few limits should be placed here on what questions may be asked or which views may be expressed. By encouraging a clear delineation of the distinct roles occupied in a discourse community, the author offers a strategy for addressing contentious social issues in a principled manner.

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Ruminating on Christopher Keller’s wide-ranging and thought-provoking lead essay for this forum, an image—a memory—keeps coming to mind, an image that would at first blush seem to have nothing to do with the sundry topics at hand. The image is a student’s face. The student, whom I remember well, was enrolled in the honors program at a four-year university in the buckle of the Bible belt; he was a conservative Evangelical and a young-Earth creationist; I was the director of the program and one of three professors team-teaching a course in which the student had enrolled and for which *On the Origin of Species* was the core text. My academic training is in philosophy with a particular focus on religion and morality, and my co-teachers were a biologist and an anthropologist. Our goal in the course was to help students understand the evidence for biological evolution and think through the implications of Darwinism (or rather, neo-Darwinism) for numerous areas of human concern.

The student simply would not get it.

Most readers of this essay know the feeling well. A magnificent course has been created: the syllabus is well thought-out, the readings and other assignments are fascinating, the PowerPoint slides are few but brilliant, the professors are engaging, the students have lively minds and make interesting observations, you've just made a particularly compelling point, and . . . that one guy *just won't get it*. The problem, to be clear, is not that the student disagrees with some proposition that has been asserted, nor that the student holds a false belief concerning some point of information or other. The problem is that the student seems unwilling to see that a point of view on the matter other than their own is even possible, let alone worthy of consideration.

Further complicating my situation were extracurricular considerations. The student's parents, who shared his religious convictions, were friends of mine. They knew that I did not agree with all their religious views, but they were my friends, and it was easy to imagine our relationship being damaged if I pushed their son too hard to reconsider ideas their whole family held dear. I pushed anyway. I felt I had to. It was my job. As a professor and as the director of an honors program, I had a professional duty to attempt to get the student to understand alternative perspectives. Perhaps he would never become persuaded to change his mind; perhaps he would never even become sympathetic toward a different point of view. Nonetheless, I needed to do what I could to get him to question his own perspective and consider others.

There is good reason for such questioning, of course; while public institutions of higher education may have missions that differ from each other in some respects, their fundamental *raison d'être* is to cultivate citizens who possess the skills necessary to flourish in a pluralistic, democratic republic and contribute to the common good. (I am speaking here of public institutions in nations relevantly similar to the United States. My comments would not necessarily apply to a private college with a radically different mission or to a public university in a non-pluralistic or nondemocratic society.) Among these skills is the frequently ill-defined cluster of abilities we call "critical thinking." A public college or university that does not intend for its graduates to be able to weigh and evaluate evidence, to engage in critical self-reflection, to ask good questions, or to be skilled at assessing the pros and cons of various answers to those questions is not doing its job. The same goes for the professors who teach at that institution. After all, whether we define the common good in purely pragmatic terms as that which enables as many people as possible to get what they want or in the loftier theoretical language of justice and human flourishing, we cannot hope to achieve it in the absence of a citizenry—or at least a critical mass of citizens—that thinks clearly and deeply and well; this

is what colleges and universities are for, and, *ipso facto*, it is what honors programs and honors colleges are for, too.

If I am correct, however, then we honors educators, *qua* educators, must be cautious with respect to the forms of advocacy in which we engage and which we endorse. Do not misunderstand me; *qua* private citizens, each of us is and should be free to advocate for whatever the law permits (including changing what the law permits), but when we speak in our capacity as professors and administrators, we simply must be more circumspect. We are scrupulous not because we shy away from or are indifferent to the demands of justice, but rather because we recognize that a just and healthy society will be one in which there is a place for sincere questioning, where assumptions are challenged and ideas critiqued without fear of censure or reprisal, and we recognize that our nation's colleges and universities are that place. We are the people entrusted with ensuring that ideas—ideas we reject as well as ideas we endorse—are expressed with clarity and in their strongest forms and that they are critiqued with the same degree of rigor.

I worry, when I look at honors education (and American higher education more broadly) through the lens of the many questions Keller has raised and on which the editors of *JNCHC* have exhorted us to reflect, that we are in danger of failing in our stewardship. An admirable and even noble passion for justice and advocating for the marginalized too frequently becomes a myopic approach to issues that are genuinely complex and difficult. We become dogmatists. We approach contentious matters with the same mindset as my young-Earth creationist student: confident that our take on a disputed question is uniquely correct, unable to articulate any rationale why someone might in good faith hold a different view, and unwilling to subject our own assumptions to the same process of critical interrogation we apply to others'. Many of those who would have us approach honors education "in the manner of the Occupy Movement" seem not to recognize that the Occupy mindset itself is open to question: the hermeneutics of suspicion may and should be applied to the critical stance as well as to the status quo, and there are contexts in which the critical stance is the status quo. Assumptions about imbalances of power and our own rectitude in redressing those imbalances cannot be held sacrosanct, at least not when we address them in our capacity as educators. We need to ensure that honors is and remains a place where uncomfortable questions can be asked and squarely addressed, where few, if any, questions and ideas are ruled out-of-bounds.

The present forum focuses explicitly on the notion of boundaries, so let me take the preceding idea a step further and submit that the push toward overt

advocacy on behalf of various causes and the concomitant tendency to treat criticism of those causes as beyond the pale violate a boundary that should be respected while establishing a boundary that ought not exist. To be an advocate for a cause is to treat it, on some level, as a settled matter, a nonnegotiable commitment. Once again, however, a free society needs contexts—such as the public college classroom and *a fortiori* the public honors college classroom—in which ideas can be discussed and questions raised without the correct answers having been predetermined. Advocacy *per se* cannot accept these terms. Thus, there must be a boundary between the work of the pedagogue and the work of the advocate. For the same reason, and as noted above, there must be few, if any, boundaries concerning which ideas are up for debate at a public college, but the advocate cannot endorse the absence of these latter boundaries any more than they can endorse the presence of the former.

Now, none of the above should be read as suggesting that no questions may ever be treated as settled in any collegiate context nor that dogmatism is always inappropriate in higher education. Frequently, the very nature of a college course will require that some ideas be treated as nonnegotiable. Chemistry professors, for example, are entitled in the context of their chemistry courses to make philosophical assumptions about the reality of the physical world and the reliability of the laws of nature. The college community as a whole may—indeed, should—be dogmatic about the fundamental equality of all of its members, denying the legitimacy of overtly racist and sexist attitudes that refuse to acknowledge some members of the community as genuine peers. Commitments of these sorts, derived as they are from institutional missions, are perfectly appropriate and do not count as “advocacy” of the sort I am concerned with here.

Furthermore, even within the context of an academic honors program, there will be opportunities to support causes and policies for which overt institutional advocacy would be inappropriate. Consider, for example, admissions criteria. Every honors program and college must use some criterion or other for evaluating applications, and it is compatible with everything I have argued here to advocate, in the name of equity and social justice, for test-blind admissions policies, or for prioritizing class rank over other considerations, or for revising essay scoring rubrics to minimize the effects of racial bias, and so on. Indeed, we may go well beyond advocacy and into honest-to-goodness implementation of such policies. In practice, in other words, what I am advocating is a clear delineation of the different roles we play. What may be appropriate behavior for me *qua* dean may not be appropriate for me *qua* classroom

instructor. What may be appropriate or even necessary for me *qua* professor may not be desirable or even possible for me *qua* private citizen.

Before I close, let me share another anecdote about an encounter with a student. This one took place during the COVID pandemic in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. I was leading an extracurricular reading group for students and faculty at a community college in the Great Lakes region. We were discussing Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law*, which details many of the ways that twentieth-century government policies overtly and intentionally imposed segregation on the United States, always to the detriment of people of color. We had what I took to be an uplifting and interesting conversation about public policy proposals (see chapter 12 of Rothstein's book) that might help the United States move toward racial equity and greater integration. Later that day, I received an email from one of the participating students informing me that she would no longer be attending our meetings. The reason, in a nutshell, was that she had serious reservations about the merits and justice of some of the ideas we had discussed, but she did not feel that there was genuine freedom for her to ask her questions or raise criticisms of "the party line." Fairly or unfairly, she saw in me and my colleagues that same trait I lamented in the young-Earth creationist above: we just didn't get it. The problem was not that we disagreed with some particular proposition, nor that we were in error about a point of information, but that we gave the impression of being unwilling to see that a point of view on the matter other than our own was even possible, let alone worthy of consideration.

I think about that email a lot. I would like to believe that the student misinterpreted something. Maybe she did. But that is not really relevant. My goal, moving forward, is to ensure that this impression of a "party line" is not given again—not in my discussion groups or classes, anyway. We should all want to live in a society with greater racial equity, but we should also want to live in a society where college administrators and professors encourage their students to ask uncomfortable questions and challenge the conventional wisdom . . . even when it is ours. These goals are not incompatible. We can and must do both, by recognizing the differences between the roles each of us occupies, between what properly may occupy us as individual citizens and the responsibilities we hold in our occupations as educators.

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