313. Academic Culture

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Academic culture is a culture of disputation. This makes it unlike just about every other culture. An academic university, a university that houses a culture of disputation, is a very strange human institution indeed.

Academic culture is a culture of disputation as a result of two factors. First, the people who come together to engage in study want to understand, interpret and appreciate the things of the world, and they want to get the world right. To get the world right they need to criticize current theories, interpretations and evaluations of that world, for they need to find where those theories, interpretations and evaluations go wrong. Having identified errors, an academic will attempt to correct them. Second, the people who gather to engage in study value, and value highly, intellectual and moral autonomy, both their own autonomy and the autonomy of others. They will not, then, seek to manipulate others into believing and valuing as they do, but instead will confront others with evidence and arguments and invite criticism of their ideas.

A culture of disputation is a rare and fragile thing because disputation is unpleasant and troubling. Most people do not like to engage in it. Among the most shocking and hurtful things one person can do to another is to tell that person he's wrong about something. For some people, certainly, criticism and disputation come naturally, but very few people are like that. For most serious academics—those, that is, who have come to enjoy disputation—their taste is a taste they have acquired.

Almost always when someone comes up with a powerful idea, an idea that resonates with his fellows, the institution that grows up around that idea, and around the person who pronounced it, will be like a church. The task of the institution that houses it will be to protect the idea and the reputation of its originator, and to spread that idea, in its original form, far and wide. Criticizing the idea or engaging in disputation about it will be reviled by church members as disrespectful. Criticism expresses an attitude of discontent, as though things are not fine as they are and must be interrogated. Criticism can be dangerous, of course, for it might eventually bring down a settled way of life. It's for these reasons that many people want criticism and disputation to be policed closely, if allowed to exist at all, and so they have been policed closely in most human cultures.

Nonetheless, although very rarely, intellectuals will adopt a critical attitude toward the ideas of a master, and perhaps even openly dispute that idea. Thales of Miletus, who lived until the middle of the sixth century BC, proposed that water is both the substance from which all substances arise and the sustaining principle of all substances. He also held that the earth floats on a body of water (and that earthquakes are caused by the water's movement). His pupil Anaximander of

Miletus reasoned that if everything were water, then nothing would be dry or hot. From this criticism of his master, Anaximander conjectured that the origin and principle of all substances cannot be any substance with which we are in direct sensory contact. He proposed *Apeiron*, the unbounded or indefinite. He also criticized the idea that the earth floats on an ocean, on the ground that that idea fails to explain what the ocean rests on. Noticing the beginning of an infinite regress, Anaximander conjectured that the earth hangs unsuspended in space. Anaximander's pupil, Anaximenes of Miletus, in turn criticized his master, and proposed air as the fundamental substance. (One lesson here is that criticism doesn't always take us closer to the truth.)

We have here, in ancient Greece among the three central Milesian philosophers, an early instance of a culture and tradition of disputation. According to the twentieth-century philosopher Karl Popper, it was as though Thales said to Anaximander, "here is my theory to explain these phenomena; now you take it and criticize it, and through your criticism devise a better theory," and that Anaximander said the same to Anaximenes. The tradition of disputation of the early pre-Socratics has through the ages occasionally died or been suppressed, but it has also now and then been revived or rediscovered. Cultures of disputation have always been minority cultures, but a culture of disputation is integral to any academic university.

Academic culture is an individualistic culture, as it must be if it is a culture enjoyed by people who prize thinking and valuing for themselves. It's not a culture in which ideas are chosen for discussion on the basis of whose ideas they are or in order that certain groups be properly represented. If your own or your favourite ideas are discussed in academically rigorous classrooms or in academic papers, it is because members of the community think they are ideas worth discussing.

The language of academics at an academic university will be direct and clear. Academics will be candid and will not engage in euphemism or indirection. Anything might come up for discussion and anything could be said about it. All accept that whatever is said may be said in the way the speaker prefers. Being concerned for people's sensitivities is contrary to academic culture. Academics do not care if people are embarrassed or offended by what they say. (In any case, a person who possesses intellectual and moral autonomy is never offended.)

Importantly, academics are not disputing with a view to doing something. In non-academic cultures, disputation is sometimes tolerated when people have to decide what to do so that they can act. At issue in these cases will be a practical matter; criticism might be allowed as part of a process of deliberation, so that a decision can be taken and a path of action initiated. In academic life, on the other hand, there is no deadline for action and no decision to be taken. Critical inquiry is in principle interminable. Neither individual professors nor students need ever reach a final conclusion.

Academic culture is a collegial culture, in that distinctions of rank or office, if there are any, do not weigh on people's minds or require deference from anyone. Everyone is free to speak, and to speak critically, with anyone else. Some associate collegiality with civility, but that's a mistake. Academic culture is not actually a culture of civility, no matter how collegial professors and students happen to be. Civility is not an academic value; unlike, say, academic

freedom or respect for intellectual autonomy, it is not constitutive of the academic mission. Civility is, rather, an external value, one that a person would honour for reasons unconnected to academic concerns and academic culture. Now, it may appear to a naïve eye that professors and students are treating each other civilly, but that's just because their behaviour often follows the patterns of civility. They are not behaving in the ways they do to be civil, though, or out of civility. Professors and students committed to the academic mission are not shouting at each other, to be sure; but that's not because they value civility. The reason they are listening closely to each other is that they believe that others might have something to say and they don't want to miss it. Professors and students pursuing the academic mission will give the impression of people being civil with each other, but it is an impression only. Their motive is not civility.

Indeed, often they won't be civil with each other, though they remain cheerful and without spite. Academic life requires staying on topic in a discussion and neither repeating oneself nor telling stories or singing praises. A professor or student who goes on too long for no reason connected to getting things right may properly be interrupted in the hope of moving the discussion forward. Irrelevant words may be ignored. All this will seem rude to spectators, and rude it might be. But firm control of the discussion for the sake of the academic mission is welcomed by professors and students committed to that mission.

The great destroyer of academic culture is authority. When professors or students abandon discussion and criticism to seek from a dean or an academic vice president a ruling, academic life ends. Appealing to authority will bring censorship and self-censorship. Candid discussion cannot occur under such conditions. Academic life will then have to go underground, even within a university.

This, sadly, is the current condition of many of our universities. Instead of a culture of disputation, they feature a culture of celebration. Rather than identities being interrogated and examined, identities are affirmed and lauded. Instead of individualism, they favour teams, groups or collectives. Professors and students, instead of pursuing insights into what interests them, are encouraged to find authors and topics that represent ethnic or other identity groups. Instead of respect for intellectual and moral autonomy, they are required to value safety and to defer to people's feelings and identities.

To summarize: 1) Academic culture is a culture of disputation. We dispute with each other in our attempt to find the truth—or, at least, to identify error. 2) A culture of disputation is difficult both to create and to sustain. Few people are native to such a culture, and few who are not native will ever go native. 3) A culture of disputation is necessary, though, if people who value intellectual and moral autonomy are to come together to pursue study. In study, people willingly put their feelings and identities at risk. 4) To a naïve observer, academic culture will appear to be a culture of civility. That appearance, though, is a mere artifact. The behaviour of people concerned with understanding, interpreting or appreciating the ways of the world might simulate civility, but their behaviour is guided by values internal to the academic mission, and not constrained by values external to it. 5) Seeking a ruling from a university authority, such as a dean or an academic vice president, or a disciplinary association, is fundamentally anti-academic. Doing so introduces fear and self-censorship into an academic community, thereby destroying academic culture.

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