EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF WOKE

Wayne I. Henry
University of the Fraser Valley
wayne.henry@ufv.ca

Susan T. Gardner
Capilano University
sgardner@capilanou.ca

Abstract

Woke ideology, with its demand for unquestioning loyalty to its tenets, has threatened the very possibility of reasoned dialogue across difference, something that anchors the very foundation of our democratic way of life. After making the claim that we all ought to be unquestionably loyal to the two directives that are essential for the possibility of reasoned dialogue across difference, i.e., (i) let them speak, and (ii) avoid insult, we argue that the core command for all educators ought to be *challenge*, rather than *safety*, so that they can equip their students with an eagerness and audacity of "daring to know"—which inevitably requires reflection on opposing viewpoints, and that philosophy is just the discipline that can encourage this *attitude*, at least insofar as it encourages young people to *be* philosophical, as opposed to merely learning *about* philosophy. We argue that the present context is such that learning to dialogue across difference has become an inescapable educational imperative and that if this call is ignored, if we refuse to undertake the Herculean effort required to nurture the unique human capacity to cooperatively *reason together*, the result, at least according to Matthew Lipman (the founder of Philosophy for Children (P4C), will be that we will most surely *die together* (Lippman 1988: 18).

Keywords: Woke, the Enlightenment, Philosophy for Children, education for dialogue, safetyism, truth.

1. Introduction

We will begin with what might be called an "enlightened" critique of "woke" by making the case that, however else one wants to classify "woke," locating it as a left-wing project does a disservice to the traditional left-wing views that are grounded in the Enlightenment demand of respect for persons, and the firm belief that reasoned dialogue is the most effective pathway to human progress. We will then argue that "woke" tactics are problematic precisely because they are divisive in the sense of making reasoned dialogue virtually impossible. This will be followed by arguing that, though wokesters pride themselves on being "progressive," not only is this not a title

that they have earned, their focus is such that they make happy bed-fellows with those often considered reactionary. We will then move to reflecting on what Immanuel Kant argues ought to be the most important message that comes down to us from the Enlightenment, namely that we ought to trust reasoned dialogue rather than authority in deciding what to believe and/or what to do, and then go on to argue that that message translates into two directives that, if adopted, will help to alter "woke-infected" attitudes towards discourse. These directives are (i) let them speak, and (ii) avoid insult. Finally, we will examine the educational implications that emerge from our journey through woke, to counter-woke, to the Enlightenment and its ramifications, and suggest that the core command is that *challenge*, rather than *safety*, ought to be the motto of all educators in order to equip students with the eagerness and audacity of "daring to know," and that philosophy is just the discipline that can encourage this *attitude*, at least insofar as it encourages young people to *be* philosophical as opposed to merely learning *about* philosophy. Ultimately, the call to transform education is one that emanates from the kaleidoscope of uniquely potentially catastrophic challenges that humanity faces in the twenty-first century[1]: a potential tragedy of misery that renders complacently continuing education as usual unacceptable. The present context is such that learning to dialogue across difference has become an inescapable educational imperative. If this call is ignored, if we refuse to undertake the Herculean effort required to nurture the unique human capacity to cooperatively *reason together*, the result, at least according to Matthew Lipman, will be that we will most surely *die together* (Lippman 1988: 18).

2. The Left is not Woke

In her book *Left Is Not Woke*, Susan Neiman makes the claim that being left is not the same thing as being woke. More strongly she asserts that the basic assumptions of the woke movement are inconsistent with leftist politics, whose foundations she locates in the Enlightenment values of universalism, a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress (Neiman 2023: 2). This is a thesis with which we concur, but we will go further and argue that, despite contemporary views to the contrary (including those of the woke crowd), the core values of the Enlightenment that beatified the human capacity to reason collectively toward truth were indeed "enlightened," and that our combined welfare will be seriously jeopardized if we do not return to the "enlightened" fold.

Notwithstanding the enormous difficulties with defining what we shall mean by "woke," it has, in all its manifestations, succumbed to identitarian politics that push advocates to a tribalism that has them squaring off against libertarian Conservatives. This is the contradiction with the universalism of Enlightenment values made explicit. And this is precisely the focus of our main concern: in so far as wokeism is divisive by its very assumptions, it is of paramount importance to

---

[1] For example, in the last 50 years, the human population has doubled from 4 to 8 billion (!), and many have argued that exponentially expanding capitalism, that inevitably accompanies population growth, is quite literally incompatible with a habitable planet (Cobb 2017/1995; Magdoff and Foster 2017/2010; Rees 2017).

diagnose the nature of this divisive discourse as a means to discovering, if possible, how we might bridge this gap going forward.

3. Woke is divisive

The real problem with wokeism, it seems to us, is that it is so divisive; indeed, about as divisive as the racist, sexist, and homophobic rhetoric we sometimes hear from Libertarians, and that this is the case because of the weaponization of the language used. Specifically, whenever we hear someone advocating for the woke view, the message is always a "nudge, nudge, wink, wink" gesture to fellow woke advocates that says, "we are woke and they are not." The point here is that the rhetoric itself inclines an audience to make sweeping generalizations about the characters of those outside of their tribe.

And it is for that reason that woke discourse tends to drive people to the embrace of their respective tribes, enraged or enthused depending on which side of the issue they find themselves, but further ossified in their positions and their refusal to talk to one another. Worse, it is to regard one another as enemies, at the very time when we most need to bridge our differences to come together for effective action to deal with a range of problems that can only be met with collective effort, including climate change and the consequences that flow from that, such as food insecurity, inequality, and more.

Additionally, and equally important, the real pity here is that this discourse does an enormous disservice to the ideas that have been at the heart of democratic thought since its inception: equality of rights and respect for all persons, regardless of such accidental features of their birth such as their cultural origins, or the colour of their skin, and regardless of their religious preferences, or their sexual orientation. Once identity markers become distinction insignia and are inserted into the context of woke discourse, they become a badge of honour that distinguishes the woke from everyone else who are regarded as morally deficient and therefore unfit to judge. Thus, the views of the not-woke are easily dismissed as the ravings of simpletons and enraged racists (the deplorables among us)[2].

4. "Woke" is not progressive

In his book, *A Leftist Critique of the Principles of Identity, Diversity, and Multiculturalism*, Anderson-Connolly argues that the Identity, Diversity, and Multiculturalism Program (what he refers to as IDMP and what we are referring to as woke) has confused progressives and has diverted their attention and activism *away* from the real problem of inequality and repression (Anderson-

---

[2] Mark Lilla notes, for example, that when someone says "*Speaking as an X.....*—that means that I am speaking from a privileged position. It sets up a wall against questions which, by definition, come from a non-X position. And it turns the encounter into a power relation: the winner of the argument will be she who has invoked the morally superior identity and expressed the most outrage at being questioned. So, classroom conversation that once might have begun, *I think A, and here is my argument,* now takes the form *Speaking as an X, I am offended that you claim B.* This makes perfect sense if you believe that identity determines everything. It means that there is no impartial space for dialogue" (Lilla 2017: 90).

Conolly 2019: 3). And perhaps even more importantly, he notes that identity politics poses no threat whatsoever to the interests or the agenda of the neo-liberal project of the economic and political elite, i.e., the right (4). Neo-liberals are themselves able to adopt conspicuous displays of identity as a simplistic ploy (6, 10) in ways that serve the project that continually worsens the inequality in America, (the most unequal of industrialized democracies[3]) while woke continues in its ascendance among the left.

Anderson-Connolly likewise argues that the woke movement is built on divisiveness, and so is in opposition to the core values of the Left that comes to us from the Enlightenment, which emphasizes universalism and equality (11) and, worse, that it contradicts a key organizational principle of the Left: building class solidarity across social difference (13).

And Anderson-Connolly mirrors the concern that we are taking up here, namely that the doling out of self-righteous mockery by contemporary woksters will result in alienating those in the centre and will shift the political energy and momentum toward authoritarian, even fascist regimes (13-14). He notes, in passing, that sociologist Hans Gerth found, in his research of Germany in the early years of the last century, the concerning fact that the group most supportive of nascent fascism in the 1920's was the anxious and declining middle class (Gerth 1940: 428).

Since Anderson-Connolly's main objective is to reclaim those who support the leftist values of reason, liberty, and equality away from the seductive power of woke tribalism, and since he goes on to say, quoting Bronner, that there is not a single ideal of the left that does not derive from the Enlightenment (Bronner 2004: 60),[4] let us pause for a brief review of the legacy of Enlightenment.

5. The Enlightenment

Everything about the Enlightenment carries with it a whiff of paradox.

It is because of the audacious Enlightenment idea that all human beings are potentially equal and equally deserving of respect that post-colonialism (in the sense that it is fundamentally wrong for one group to oppress another) finally got a foothold. On the other hand, the fact that colonial expeditions in the last several centuries emerged out of Europe—the same continent that gave birth to the Enlightenment, combined with the fact that Enlightenment ideas boosted and sustained the cultural milieu that drove the Scientific Revolution which gave birth to the technologies necessary to acquire colonies—has soured many in postcolonial countries on referencing "European ideas" in any form, including those of the Enlightenment.

Clearly this is deeply problematic, as the basics of "good reasoning" rests on the assumption that reasons are judged on their own merit (e.g., whether they survive counterexample) not on who happens to articulate them. Or as Anderson-Connolly puts it, only "the content—not continent—of the values is relevant" (Anderson-Connolly 2019: 203).

---

[3] https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/wealth-inequality-by-country
[4] A view widely shared, e.g., see Wilson's *Consilience* chapter 3, especially p.15 (Wilson 1998).

This is not to say, of course, that the above principle has always been recognized. In Nazi Germany for instance, anything Jewish, including Jewish science and Jewish art, was considered degenerate (something from which the Allies, ironically, may have benefited).

So, while we recognize that a reference to the ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment may elicit ad hominem or ad continentem fury, and while we also recognize that there was such an abundance of ideas that emerged from the Enlightenment that different scholars have chosen to articulate a message very different from the one we take up here (e.g., Horkheimer and Adorno 1947/2002[5]), the "enlightened message" that we believe is most crucial for human welfare is the one articulated by Kant, who may very well have popularized the label "enlightenment."

In an essay in response to the question "*Was ist Aufklärung?*" asked by the German periodical *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in December 1784, Kant responded that Enlightenment can be said to occur when humans begin to emerge from their self-imposed "immaturity," which he defines as "the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another" (Kant 1784/1992: 1). To the question, "Do we presently live in an enlightened age?" Kant's answer was "No," but he went to say that while not yet enlightened, we could be described as living in an age of enlightenment in the sense that there are "clear indications that the way is now being opened for men to proceed freely in this direction and that the obstacles to general enlightenment—to their release from their self-imposed immaturity—are gradually diminishing" (4).

Foucault[6], in discussing Kant's essay on Enlightenment, suggests that we note well that Kant characterizes it as an ongoing process, and one that is an *obligation*. He says of Kant that "From the very first paragraph, he notes that man himself is responsible for his immature status. Thus, it has to be supposed that he will be able to escape from it only by a change that he himself will bring about in himself" (Foucault 1984: 54). Foucault also notes that Kant believes that refusing to follow authority is an act of "courage to be accomplished personally." Foucault reminds us of Kant's edit: "*Aude sapere:* 'dare to know,' 'have the courage, the audacity, to know'" (p. 34). The takeaway message is thus that "Kant in fact describes Enlightenment as the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority" (p. 36).

And this is precisely the message that we suggest bears repeating: that each of us has the responsibility and should strive to have the courage to *reason for ourselves*—rather than parroting the authority of the tribe—as to what the best course of action ought to be. And since reasoning *for ourselves* requires *reasoning with others* in order to estimate the potential shortcomings of our

---

[5] Horkheimer and Adorno were primarily concerned with the degree to which the Scientific Revolution enabled humans to dominate everything in their path. "What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1947/2002: 2). "The unshakable confidence in the possibility of controlling the world which Freud anachronistically attributes to magic applies only to the more realistic form of world domination achieved by the greater astuteness of science" (7).

[6] We are aware that citing Foucault is paradoxical since Foucault is often considered the father of post-modernism, a movement that has been credited with nurturing the suspicion of reason as simply another ploy in power relations and hence tends to be embraced by the woke crowd.

own positions (Gardner 2009: 23-34), our attitudes toward discourse with those who think differently will ultimately determine if reason, rather than authority, rules.

6. Altering attitudes about discourse

The dictate that we ought to reason for ourselves carries with it the implicit assumption that this has value if and only if we can *reason well* in the sense of being able to detect error in reasoning, whatever its source. This in turn leads us to the seemingly paradoxical deduction that in order to reason for ourselves, we must be able to *listen* to the reasoning and objections of others.[7] [8]

Thus, given that *listening to others* is necessary for being able to *reason for ourselves*, we would like to offer two principles that we suggest, if adopted, would be beneficial in altering attitudes toward our presently "woke-infected" discourse and open up the possibility of using reason, rather than blind ideological authority, to chart our way forward.

These principles are:
  i)   Let them speak.
  ii)   Avoid insults.
We will deal with these in turn.

6.1. Let them speak

Listening to and reflecting on *reasoned* opposing positions is absolutely necessary in order to claim to be reasoning at all because we can't possibly know if the position that we hold is the best of all possible alternatives unless we have thoroughly reflected on the merits of alternatives, and thereafter used reason to judge which is the best. And it is *this* fundamental ingredient of reason— that we listen to and reflect on the reasons offered for positions that are different from our own— that is under threat from wokesters who often pride themselves on their power to censor. Though not an isolated event, the following news story from an event in Canada gives the flavour of this phenomenon.

On Friday, March 2017, Jordan Peterson, then a faculty member of the psychology department at the University of Toronto, was scheduled to give a talk and engage a panel of interlocutors at McMaster University. The topic was whether there is an obligation to address people by their preferred gender identity terms, something Peterson had, for some time, been referring to as "compelled speech," and which he opposed, in part at least because of its infringement of his right to freedom of expression. The event had been arranged by a student group at McMaster with the intention of having a fulsome debate about freedom of speech in connection with political correctness, particularly in the context of academic settings. This talk never happened, at least not

---

[7] Habermas thus argues that "assertions and goal-oriented actions are more rational the better the claim that is connected with them can be defended against criticism" (Habermas 1981/1992: 9).

[8] Bailin and Battersby refer to this as "collaborative oppositionality" (https://www.argnet.org/ethics-of-arg-schedule).

in its official, sanctioned format. A crowd of protestors stormed the meeting and shouted Peterson down, refusing to let him speak. [9]

While it is certainly understandable that many find Peterson's views repugnant, refusing to let him (or anyone else) speak belies the assumption that we are reasonable beings who can dialogue our way toward ever better modes of living together.

This is not to say that there is no such thing as "hate speech" which can be rightly interfered with. However, what counts as hate speech must be left to legislation to carefully define, and how it shall be dealt with in terms of legal penalties. The point, of course, is that such legislation must be articulated and brought into the statutes on the basis of extensive debate, both within the legislative bodies that enact these laws and in consultation with their citizenry as the laws and policies are being formulated. It must not be left to persons acting on their own to decide who shall and who shall not be permitted to speak. Those who assume such authority not only presuppose that they are morally superior, but worse, they presuppose that since they are already in possession of "the truth," they have nothing to learn. This smug conviction is dangerous for agents in that they are reaffirmed in their self-assurance, and also for societies of which they are a part in that such strategies stultify the search for new knowledge and new ideas, and, in the hands of post-modernists, may result in the abandonment of the distinction between truth and falsity altogether.

John Stuart Mill, an heir to the Enlightenment, argues cogently against this kind of censorship:

> [T]he peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; *those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it*. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error" (Mill 1859/1962: 142-3, emphasis added).

And he goes on to argue that the real wrong done by suppression of speech and opinion is that our own beliefs and values become dead dogma; No longer animated by the felt need to defend them against alternative views, they become mere jingoistic slogans.

6.2. Avoid insults

Much of the righteous anger that percolates up from wokesters is laser focused on attitudes: that white people think that they are so much better than non-whites, that straight people look down on those who are not straight, and so on. Certainly, these attitudes (whenever they occur) are annoying, and can do actual harm in situations of unequal power. However, as Jonathan Haidt points out in his book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, if you are serious about changing the minds of your opponents, you must state your case with respect, and openness to dialogue, since combat mode is worse than ineffective (Haidt 2012:

---

[9] See CBC news brief: https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/mcmaster-debate-with-controversial-professor-jordan-peterson-disrupted-by-activists-1.4031843

48-49), and you must be open to having your own mind changed (as emphasized by Mill in the indented quote above).

Anand Giridharadas likewise argues that it is imperative that we reduce the level of contemporary contempt and dismissal since these turn people away from engagement and undermine the premise of democracy, namely that it is possible to choose the future together (Giridharadas 2022: 37). And, according to Giridharadas, the best way to do that, is to keep focused on what you hope to achieve in the *future* rather than what you oppose about the past (36).

There is, of course, much more to be said about how best to move forward in our efforts to create and sustain a society in which citizens are able to dialogue together respectfully and meaningfully in an effort to create an ever better future. But that is the point. Much more needs to be said. As Adam Gopnik reminds us, liberal democracies "progress" on the back of "a thousand small sanities" that nudge us toward ever greater egalitarian social reform and ever greater (if not absolute) tolerance of human difference because of, and only because of, reasoned and (mostly) unimpeded conversation, demonstration, and debate (Gopnik 2019: 23-24). And he goes on to argue that since liberal democratic institutions supported by unimpeded dialogue are rare and fragile (201), their very survival depends on early and extensive *educational* strategies (225) that instill in its citizenry the cognitive virtues of constant inquiry, fallibilism, and self-doubt (231) so that they will eagerly participate and effectively contribute to the reasoned dialogue that is the soul, spirit, and structure of their very way of life.

And so it is to that subject, i.e., education, that we now turn.

7. Educational implications

7.1. Abandon safety

In their book *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good and Bad Intentions are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Lukianoff and Haidt make the case that contemporary educators are virtually ensuing that young people will be incapable of participating in the rigorous reasoning process that is their inheritance from the Enlightenment by adopting and spreading the false assumption that students are fragile, and so have a right to be "safe" from ideas that might be a source of emotional negativity (Lukianoff and Haidt 2019: 24). They argue that this "safetyism" deprives young people of the experiences that their antifragile minds need, thereby making them more fragile, anxious, and prone to seeing themselves as victims (32). And, of course, the more they see themselves as victims, the more prone they are to demand "safe spaces," thus creating a vicious circle. As Lukianoff and Haidt go on to say, "with requests for safe spaces, trigger warnings, microaggression training, and bias response teams, it is difficult to see how this could produce well-educated, bold, and open-minded college graduates" (178).

It is imperative, therefore, that "safetyism" be abandoned, and that, under the enlightenment directive of "dare to know," we *ensure* that students are *challenged* by being exposed to ideas that may be unfamiliar or, though familiar, may conflict with their existing beliefs and values. And,

crucially, it is to insist that in responding to these ideas that elicit discomfort, students suspend judgement long enough to hear and genuinely understand the position being advanced, asking questions as necessary, and responding with reasons of their own.

For those of us who assume that individuals ought to be at least different, and hopefully better, post education when compared to pre-education, a moment's reflection on the suggestion that we ought to keep students "safe" from unfamiliar ideas, or ideas that conflict with their existing beliefs and/or values, reveal this suggestion to be outlandish. Such a stricture would imply that education, like the algorithms of social media, should guarantee that the "so-called" educational experience is nothing more than a process of re-affirming our students in their existing beliefs and values. Taking this approach in the classroom trivializes the "educational" project; worse, it renders it harmful by ensuring that young citizens will be literally unfit for the sort of genuine dialogue that is necessary to keep democracy afloat. And it has the long-term effect of re-affirming the values of safetyism: that we keep each other safe by clustering together with others of our tribe, excluding all those not sharing our beliefs and values.

The moral of this part of the story, then, is this: education should equip our students with the eagerness and audacity of "daring to know," a bracing enthusiasm for the stimulus of intellectual challenge. And philosophy is just the discipline that can encourage this *attitude*, at least insofar as it encourages young people to *be* philosophical as opposed to merely learning *about* philosophy.

7.2. Nurturing a philosophical attitude

In his book *Becoming: Basic Considerations for Psychology of Personality*, Gordon Allport argues (echoing Kant's call for the need to abandon immaturity) that the challenge for all of us, through our whole lives, is to engage in continually attempting to reconcile two modes of becoming, the tribal and the personal: the one that makes us into a mirror, the other that lights the lamp of individuality within (Allport 1955/1983: 35). According to Allport, growth toward individuality is an urgent goal (27), something he describes as a process by which we continually plot and negotiate a course towards our own idealized self-image (46): what he calls "propriate striving" (47). Allport goes on to argue that, insofar as this growth motive is activated, a shift will occur from the "must consciousness" of tribalism to the "ought consciousness" of individuality (73-4): this is what he describes as "becoming" (76).

What is particularly interesting about Allport's depiction of the human growth trajectory is that it suggests the tribalism inherent in wokeism is a natural phase of human development, something supported by Joshua Greene, in his book *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them* (Greene 2014). Greene argues that biologically speaking, humans were designed for cooperation, i.e., we were able to move beyond focusing on the well-being of "ME" and take into account well-being of "US" *but only with some people,* i.e., that our moral brains evolved for cooperation *within groups* (23). This is so because evolution is inevitably competitive; if there is no competition, then there is no natural selection (24). Thus, our tendency to value others has been

evolutionarily ensured to be *confined to tribal members* precisely because this gave a competitive advantage to the survival of our own tribe.

Greene goes on to make the argument that, though we are wired for tribalism, due to neural plasticity we are not *hardwired* (55), so tribalism isn't an inevitable destiny, and he suggests that, in fact, we ought to find such a destiny repugnant.

But why is tribalism so repugnant? Though this is an assumption that has been threaded through the discussion thus far, it is in need of defense. After all, tribalism has been alive and well within the human species since we walked out of the caves, so why should we make the argument, as we do here, that education should focus on helping young people move beyond this natural tendency?

Of this the *Philosophy for Children* (P4C) founder, Matthew Lipman, in making the case that we all need to learn to reasonably dialogue across difference, wrote:

> The greatest disappointment of traditional education has been its failure to produce people approximating the ideal of *reasonableness.* It should be evident, however, that the cost of our tolerant attitude toward *unreasonableness* are now far beyond our reach. We may still smile indulgently as we read of the legendary figures of history who were splendidly capricious and magnificently illogical: they savaged their victims, but they did *not endanger everything.* This is no longer the case; *we will have to reason together or die together* (Lipman 1988: 18, emphasis added).

The world we live in now, in other words, is very different from the world of our distant ancestors[10]; it thus requires different responses, including a different kind of education: one that nurtures a philosophical attitude such that, in our encounters with others who think differently, we restrain our tendency to forcefully bring others into line, and instead animate the potential to engage in *shared inquiry* (17).

Given that we have the recipe, the question we now face is why a different kind of education hasn't been forthcoming. If we assume that the world would be a better place if the default value of most humans was to engage in a shared inquiry, why is nurturing this tendency not the central goal of mainstream education? And given that engaging in a shared inquiry is the default value of doing philosophy, why is philosophy not the master discipline in all education?

Lipman answers these questions by arguing that, for the most part, students in the upper echelons of education who take philosophy courses have been expected to learn *about* philosophy rather than to *do* it (11). And he goes on to make the claim that, precisely for that reason, "Philosophy has had to abdicate virtually all claims to exercising a socially significant role. Even the most celebrated professors of philosophy nowadays would likely admit that, on the vast stage of world affairs, they appear only as bit players or members of the crowd" (11).

---

[10] See footnote 1. And it is of note that there were 3 billion less people on the planet, and climate change had not yet become a major issue, when Lipman wrote these words.

Lipman, spent the rest of his career, after leaving his tenure track job at Columbia University in 1972, establishing The Institute of Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC)[11]. He died in 2010.

According to Lipman the critical component of educating for a philosophical attitude is to engage youngsters in non-stop *Communities of Philosophical Inquiry* (CPIs), which returns us to our first principle discussed above, i.e., "let them speak."

7.3. Let them speak

A typical classroom, whether in an elementary or post-secondary setting, is one in which those with authority speak and those with no authority listen. It is hardly surprising, then, that students emerge from years of this sort of experience with the assumption that if there is an authority, e.g., a tribal ideology, falling in line with that authority is the order of the day. Thus, since it is this experience that produces this assumption, it seems evident that a change in this experience is required to dismantle it. And such a change, we suggest, must consist in inviting students to speak in class; not just in the sense of asking and answering questions, but in the sense of actively engaging them in dialogue with their peers throughout their educational years.

And this is precisely the pedagogical format of Philosophy for Children, referred to as a *Community of Philosophical Inquiry* (CPI). In a CPI, students are invited to focus on contentious, hopefully relevant, questions and to dialogue with one another (under the tutelage of a philosophically trained facilitator) with the goal of developing a deeper understanding of the issue at hand.

In Philosophy for Children, practiced around the world, and despite its name, reference to the philosophical greats is usually non-existent though, in the original IAPC manuals, the messages of the greats often come repackaged in child-friendly novels. After reading sections of the novel, youngsters are then invited to come up with their own questions for discussion. Repackaged Descartes, for example, is found in the novel *Elfie*, written for early primary grades in which Elfie says:

> Seth says "Elfie hardly ever talks. It's like she's not for real!" That shows how wrong he can be! Maybe I don't talk much, but I think all the time. I even think when I sleep. Last night, I was in my bed, and I said to myself, "Elfie, are you asleep?" I touched my eyes, and they were open, so I said, "No, I'm not asleep." Suddenly, I thought "that can be wrong. Maybe a person could sleep with her eyes open". Then I said to myself, "Right now, Elfie, you're wondering, and since you're wondering, you must be thinking! And if you're thinking then, no matter what Seth says, you're for real!" (Lipman 1988: Book 1, 4-5)

---

[11] https://www.montclair.edu/iapc/

After reading the above section, youngsters might choose to engage in shared inquiry about the following sorts of questions, many of which are only tangentially connected to the reading, but which are nonetheless relevant to their own lives.

Should Elfie care about what Seth thinks?

Should Elfie try to prove to Seth that she is for real?

Is dreaming important?

Do you ever feel that you are "not for real"?

Is feeling "not for real" a bad feeling? If so, why?

Of course, one need not utilize philosophical texts or repackaged philosophical novels as the means to solicit philosophically rich questions. Children's books are frequently used by P4C facilitators[12] and of course newspapers and magazines can be interesting sources for high school students. Additionally , many facilitators themselves articulate questions from which they invite participants to choose[13]. Also, though Philosophy for Children is called "Philosophy for *Children*," the *format* of the *Community of Inquiry* can easily transplant into the university environment[14]. There are, for instance, several critical thinking texts that advocate the use of the Community of Inquiry (Gardner 2009; Bailin and Battersby 2010; Battersby and Bailin 2018) which have the advantage of offering students the opportunity to utilize their new-found philosophical tools in dialogue with one another: "Oops, that was an illegitimate appeal to authority," or, "I wonder if we are creating a false dilemma." As well, the Community of Inquiry is efficacious in courses normally focused on information transfer. Thus, for instance, after assigning a reading on Kant, an instructor might ask students to engage in shared inquiry about what Kant might think of casual sex, or of young people purchasing expensive designer jeans, thus opening up the possibility for students to actually and relevantly use the information that they have consumed, as well as offering the instructor the opportunity to fix misunderstandings or offer nuanced additions.

Ultimately, the bottom-line take-home message is this: just as Socrates did thousands of years ago, it is critical that educators engage future citizens in dialogue that is important to them (so that they have extensive experience in genuinely reflecting on opposing viewpoints on *relevant* issues), and that is sufficiently contentious that they will inevitably be exposed to opposing viewpoints and so begin to appreciate opposition as an opportunity for growth rather than as an annoyance. It is obvious, but worth emphasizing, that Socrates's approach to philosophy was the very antithesis of safetyism.

7.4. Truth

---

[12]   Tom   Wartenberg   has   a   website   with   suggested   questions   on   various   books. https://www.prindleinstitute.org/teaching-children-philosophy/

[13] See Turgeon 2015.

[14] Or transplant into non-strictly academic environments such as camps (e.g., http://thinkingplayground.org/).

Mill (as quoted above) makes the case that freedom of speech is important *not* because it makes people feel good, but because reflecting on differing viewpoints is a necessary condition for moving toward truth. This same argument needs to be made evident to participants of a Community of Inquiry, i.e., that the point of listening to different viewpoints is *not* because it is polite, or because it makes others feel validated; the point is *not* to listen quietly while running an internal narrative that is screaming about the stupidity of the one talking. The point, rather, is to view genuine dialogical inquiry as a potential journey toward truth; and that we all need to abandon the assumption that we already know the truth[15], and instead assume that dialogical interchange is an adventure that may result in a more nuanced understanding or even changing one's position altogether.

Rephrasing the words[16] of Margaret Ann Sharp (Gregory and Laverty 2018: 90, 113), this dialogical journey toward truth requires two prerequisites: that participants are philosophically self-effacing (i.e., not over-pushing their own preconceived ideas), but methodologically rigorous (i.e., demanding that everyone follow the rules of reason). It is, thus, in this sense, that participants of a CPI show one another what Darwall calls "reciprocal respect" (Darwall 2006: 21) in that they assume that it is the efficacy of reason-exchange, not the emotional force of rhetoric, that will determine the course of this cooperative expedition, and, therefore, that any change in a participant's viewpoint is the result of her/his own reasoned self-determining choice rather than a consequence of surreptitious coercive manipulation (20).

This centrality of methodological rigor that is central to reciprocal respect, also, interestingly, puts limits on what it means to be "open minded." Though a principal tenet of dialogical inquiry is that one ought to welcome opposing viewpoints, the insistence on the "sovereignty of reason" that methodical rigor requires sets limits: in Dewey's words, it does not mean that one ought to put out a welcome sign that says, "come right in; there is no one home," (Dewey 2007: 133)[17]. According to Dewey, being "open-minded" means that one is willing to take the time to genuinely listen to the "reasonable" reasons offered in support of a viewpoint—to let it sink in and ripen (ibid.), but that one is also prepared to call "foul" when it is warranted. Insults, in other words, have no place on the road to truth.

7.5. Slow thinking

Though only in passing, Greene argues that "The key to using our moral brains wisely is to *match the right kind of thinking with the right kind of problem*" (Greene 2014: 294). Specifically, referring to Daniel Kahneman's notion of "fast" versus "slow" thinking (Kahneman 2013), Greene

---

[15] As Allport points out, "the surest way to lose truth is to pretend that one already wholly possesses it" (Allport 1955/1983: 17).

[16] Sharp offers this advice to new facilitators, while we are advocating this advice to all CPI participants.

[17] Indeed, one of the reasons that philosophy courses are so valuable is that it alerts students to the "misuse of reasons" that arrive at them in the form of various fallacies, and so learn to combat (as do their facilitators on CPIs) ad hominem/ad feminem attacks, false dilemmas, post hoc reasoning and illegitimate appeals to authority, etc.

suggests that, when it's Me versus Us, it's appropriate to think fast, but when it's Us versus Them, we must think slow (Greene 2014: 349), i.e., overcoming tribalism requires slow thinking.

What is particularly interesting about this suggestion is that Kahneman portrays fast (virtually unconscious) thinking as the human default mode, primarily because slow reflective thinking is hard and often slow, which can be counterproductive in a complex, ever-changing environment (Kahneman 2013: 90). Kahneman also makes the case that these two systems (what he refers to as System 1 and System 2) can interfere with one another.

Though Kahneman's purpose is not to translate his findings into suggestions for education, the implication that emerges from these combined claims is that requiring students to memorize large amounts of information (the responsibility of System 1) virtually guarantees that they spend little time in deep reflection (the responsibility of System 2).[18] But if this is the case, then the "memorize-spit" routine of typical academia effectively ensures that deep reflection, or slow thinking, will be kept idle. And when kept idle long enough, our capacity for slow thinking can atrophy. However, if deep reflection or slow thinking is necessary to minimize our tribal knee-jerk responses (as Green suggests), then it follows that our education system may be strengthening our tribal tendencies rather than doing the reverse.

7.6. Don't *just* "let them speak"

Those who use the Community of Inquiry as a pedagogical norm usually have great confidence in its power as a potentially self-regulating (Kennedy 2004: 746), self-organizing system (753), in which a facilitator is not a logical necessity (753) and in which a facilitator ought never to offer new ideas or information (755).

These laudatory assumptions may be warranted in a non-tribalized environment but may be disastrous in a group of participants who are all too well aware that excommunication and vilification awaits anyone who does not strictly toe the party line. Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) point out, for instance, that when "true believers"[19] feel threatened by dissonant voices, they often display a number of cognitive distortions such as overgeneralization (this happens all the time), dichotomous thinking (black/white), and blaming (it is the other person's fault) (p. 38). When this happens, Lukianoff and Haidt argue that the task of the teacher is to gently correct distortions, to ask a series of questions encouraging students to ground assertions in evidence, and to help students consider alternative interpretations (p. 39). It should be added that facilitators ought not to be reticent about offering contradictory evidence when such evidence is not forthcoming (e.g., that the pyramids are testament to the fact that slavery is not the invention of European White Men), as well as alternative non-inflammatory descriptors (e.g., "American Immigration Detention Centers" is a more apt description than "American Concentration Camps").

---

[18] Memorizing loosens the hold of System 2 (Kahneman 2013: 41).
[19] The term "true believer" is borrowed from Hoffer's book (1951/2010) *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements,* and in this context is used to refer to advocates of "woke" ideology.

There is thus a paradox embedded in the suggestion that engaging students in CPIs can dampen their tribalist tendencies. The paradox is that, on the one hand, we will dampen their tribalist tendencies only if the focus of the inquiry is relevant (i.e., that participants get experience reflectively listening to viewpoints that might otherwise trigger knee-jerk or even incendiary responses) but, on the other hand, precisely because the inquiry is relevant, the situation can become emotionally treacherous—something that is anathema to most educators who are trained to educate in "safe" environments. So, it is to the topic of "safe" environments that we shall now return.

7.7. Back to safety

It has been argued that the call for "safe spaces" for *students* is disadvantageous, particularly in this age of woke, since it "saves" them from dissenting but growth-prompting viewpoints. However, that very same age suggests that a call for "safe spaces" might not be inappropriate for teachers and university faculty. This is so because woke students are primed to display hitherto uncommon hostility toward educators—particularly if they have mistaken "woke" for "left" and so misdiagnose "non-agreement" as an attempt by oppressors to oppress those who are already oppressed. This is even more likely to be the case if those wokesters view the world through a Manichean good/bad prism — a thesis supported by a number of theorists, including Hoffer who argues that "true believers" are convinced they are on the side of the angels and all others on the side of the devil (Hoffer 1951/2010: 91). Similarly, Lukianoff and Haidt argue that contemporary social movements have succeeded in portraying life as a battle between good and evil (Lukianoff and Haidt 2019: 53) and Pluckrose and Lindsay argue that "applied postmodernist" movements have become new religions (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020:17) that simplistically divide up the world between the oppressor and oppressed (86), the saints and the sinners.

If this thesis carries weight, if woke students indeed view the world through a Manichean good/bad prism, it would seem to follow that they will be predisposed to view "challenging educators" as oppressors, or in league with the devil, which, in turn, may fuel a "cancelling response"—something, unhappily, that is not uncommon in this age of woke, and something that is very much to the detriment of those on the receiving end.[20]

Nevertheless, educators must remain firm in their conviction that keeping the educational landscape safe from wokester-flareups, or keeping themselves safe by refusing to poke the wokester bear, or worse, siding with wokesters in the name of safety, utterly betrays the educational calling. Despite the minefield, educators must rise to the challenge of creating an environment in which young people acquire both the will and the way to become their best selves and so maximally contribute to the flourishing of the society which they are a part of. That environment can be nothing other than one in which they learn to dialogue respectfully and

---

[20] Instances of educators who have been on the receiving end of wokester wrath has been extensively documented by the *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*. https://www.safs.ca/newsletters/

meaningfully across difference—an environment in which "reason rules," and in which diverse "reasoned" viewpoints are both solicited and welcomed.

8. Conclusion

Lukianoff and Haidt, in making their case against safetyism, and for the importance of promoting what they refer to as "antifragility," quote John Roberts, the chief justice of the United States, who, in a 2017 commencement speech at his son's middle school, said the following.

> From time to time in the years to come, I hope you will be treated unfairly, so that you come to know the value of justice. I hope you will suffer betrayal because that will teach you the importance of loyalty. Sorry to say but I hope you will be lonely from time to time so you don't take friends for granted. I wish you bad luck, again from time to time, so you will be conscious of the role of chance in life and understand that your success is not completely deserved, and that the failure of others is not completely deserved either. And when you lose, as you will from time to time, I hope every now and then, your opponent will gloat over your failure. It is a way for you to understand the importance of sportsmanship. I hope you will be ignored so you know the importance of listening to others and I hope you will have just enough pain to learn compassion. Whether I wish these things or not, they are going to happen. And whether you benefit from them or not will depend upon your ability to see the message in your misfortunes (Lukianoff and Haidt 2019: p. 193).

And to this lovely quote, we would like to add that the possibility of seeing and benefiting from the messages that come to us through the trials and tribulations of life will be hugely diminished for those "safely" imprisoned in, or who are frightened of, woke ideology, with the result that their contribution to "enlightened" dialogue, even if they were so inclined, would likewise be diminished. On the other hand, the ability to see and benefit from the messages that come to us through the trials and tribulations of life will be enhanced for those who have had the privilege of creating and/or being exposed to a thoroughly *challenging* "enlightened" education, with the consequence that their contribution to the kind of "enlightened" dialogue, necessary to keep our way of life afloat, will be amplified, which in turn will be of benefit to the "progressive" momentum of the society of which they are a part.

   Though we presently live in the age of woke, a movement that is reactionary rather than left-wing, that is inherently divisive and, in being so, distracts from the possibility of progressing toward a better world, the message that comes down to us from the Enlightenment nonetheless offers hope; namely, that if we can steer a middle path through the siren of the "safety of authority" on the one hand (including ideological authority) and the siren of "safety of domination" on the other (including the safety of intolerance) by *reasoning together* and, by doing so, reduce reasoning errors through the sieve of reasoned interpersonal dialogue—a propensity and ability that can only be nourished by educators who have adopted the moto of *challenge* rather than *safety*—we may once again, as have so many of the descendants of the Enlightenment before us, lock arms and march together toward a brighter future.

References

Allport, G. W. (1955/1983) *Becoming: Basic Considerations for Psychology of Personality.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Anderson-Connolly, R. (2019). *A Leftist Critique of the Principles of Identity, Diversity, and Multiculturalism.* London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bailin, S. and M. Battersby (2010). Reason in the balance: An Inquiry Approach to Critical Thinking. Toronto: McGraw-Hill.

Battersby, M. and Bailin, S. (2018) *Inquiry: A New Paradigm for Critical Thinking.* Windsor: Windsor Studies in Argumentation.

Bronner, S. E. (2004). *Reclaiming the Enlightenment: Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Cobb, J. B. (2017/1995) Toward a Just and Sustainable Economic Order. *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and application.* Ed. L. P. Pojman, P. Pojman, and K. McShane. Boston: Cengage, pp. 451-463.

Darwall, S. (2006) *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, And Accountability.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Dewey, J (2007) *Democracy and Education*. Teddington, Eng: Echo Library.

Foucault, M. (1984). What is Enlightenment. Rabinow (P.), ed., *The Foucault Reader,* New York, Pantheon Books, pp. 32-50. Accessed Jan 17, 2024. chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://library.tsu.ge/data/file_db/anthim/10_80354.pdf

Gardner, S. T. (2009) *Thinking Your Way to Freedom: A Guide to Owning Your Own Practical Reasoning.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Gerth, H. (1940). The Nazi Party: Its Leadership and Composition. *American Journal of Sociology,* 45 (4), pp. 517-41.

Giridharadas, A. (2022). The Art of Persuasion in a Polarized Age. *Time*. Nov. 14, pp.34-37.

Greene, Joshua (2014) *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them.* New York: Penguin.

Gregory M. R. and Laverty M. J. (eds) (2018) *In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp: Childhood, Philosophy and Education.* New York: Routledge.

Gopnik, A. (2019). *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism*. New York: Basic Books.

Habermas, J. (1981/1992). *The Theory of Communicative Action.* Vol. 1. Trans. Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.

Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion.* New York: Random House.

Hoffer, E. (1951/2010). *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements.* New York: Harper.

Horkheimer M. and T. W. Adorno (1947/2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. G. S. Noerr. Trans. E. Jephcott. Stanford: Standford University Press.

Kahneman, D. (2013) *Thinking, Fast and Slow.* Toronto: Anchor Canada.

Kant, I (1784/1992). An Answer to the Question: *What is Enlightenment? Accessed Dec. 27, 2023, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/What_is_Enlightenment%3F*

Kennedy, D. (2004). The Philosopher as Teacher: The Role of Facilitator in a Community of Philosophical Inquiry. *Metaphilosophy*, 35 (5), October, pp. 744-765.

Lilla, M. (2017). *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity politics.* New York: Harper Collins.

Lipman, M. (1988). *Elfie.* Upper Montclair, N.J.: Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children.

Lipman, M. (1988). *Philosophy Goes to School*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Lukianoff, G. and J. Haidt. (2019). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good and Bad Intentions are Setting Up a Generation for Failure.* New York: Penguin.

Magdoff, F. and J.B. Foster (2017/2010). What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism. *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and application*. Ed. L. P. Pojman, P. Pojman, and K. McShane. Boston: Cengage, pp. 464-485.

Mill, J. S. (1859/1962). *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, Essay on Bentham.* Mary Warnock (ed.) Great Britain: William Collins Sons & Co., Ltd.

Neiman, S. (2023). *Left is Not Woke.* Cambridge: Polity.

Pluckrose, H. and J. Lindsay. (2020) *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody.* Durham, North Carolina: Pitchstone.

Rees, W. E. (2017/1988) Sustainable Development: Economic Myths and Ecological Realities. *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and application*. Ed. L. P. Pojman, P. Pojman, and K. McShane. Boston: Cengage, pp. 433-441.

Turgeon, W. (2015) The Art and Danger of the Question: Its Place Within Philosophy for Children and Its Philosophical History. *Mind Culture and Activity.* 22(4):284-298. DOI: [10.1080/10749039.2015.1079919](10.1080/10749039.2015.1079919).

Wilson, E.O. (1998). *Consilience.* New York: Vintage Books.