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Friendships, Intellectual Humility, and 'Reasonable People of Goodwill'

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Abstract: In this paper Robert George discusses his experience in the secular academy and working with persons holding to very different ideologies. He begins this by recalling his own liberal arts education and how he became inspired to think about the big questions after reading Plato. His thinking about politics and religion developed over time into what he calls 'more orthodox' and 'more ecumenical.' He concludes with advice on how the Christian scholar can have meaningful interactions with those who disagree with Christianity in the secular academy and how Christians can work for reform.

I grew up in West Virginia in a family and culture that believed in God, the Democratic Party, the United Mine Workers of America, and the philosophy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.¹ We were quite sure that God believed in the Democratic Party, the United Mine Workers of America, and the philosophy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. My parents were children of immigrants. My mother's people had come to the U.S. to escape the grinding poverty of southern Italy. They were Catholics. My father's people were Syrians who had fled Ottoman oppression. They were Eastern Orthodox Christians. People on both sides of my family experienced ethnic and religious prejudice and discrimination, but they were patriotic Americans who regarded the misconduct towards them of some of their neighbors as an aberration, something inconsistent with the principles of their adopted nation. The men on both sides served proudly and bravely in World War II. Recently, my father was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor of France for his contributions in Normandy and Brittany to the allied victory. These were the familial and cultural influences and experiences that shaped me.

¹ This essay is based on an interview with Professor George published in the Swarthmore Phoenix, the campus newspaper of Swarthmore College and is used with his permission here because it describes his approach to teaching in the secular academy.

When I arrived at Swarthmore, I was what counted in those days as a liberal. I therefore fit in rather comfortably, though I was not on the radical left as some of my classmates and professors were. I was certainly not a Marxist, as some of them proclaimed themselves to be. And though I was opposed to the Vietnam War, I had no sympathy for communism. I was pro-life, but in those days being pro-life was as common on the liberal side as on the conservative side. And being pro-choice was as common on the conservative side as on the liberal. Teddy Kennedy was pro-life. Jesse Jackson was outspokenly pro-life—denouncing abortion as a form of genocide. The abortion liberalization bill enacted in California prior to *Roe v. Wade* was signed into law by the archconservative governor (and future president) Ronald Reagan. And several of the pro-choice Supreme Court justices who produced *Roe* were conservative Republican Nixon appointees.

Like my Swarthmore peers, I wanted to be sophisticated and enlightened—and to be regarded by others as sophisticated and enlightened. So a lot of what I believed simply as a matter of tribal loyalty was reinforced by a tendency to adopt views that conformed to the beliefs of what the late Irving Kristol dubbed “the knowledge class”—professors, elite journalists, and the like. With the exception of abortion, which I had thought about a lot, I hadn’t really thought myself into the positions I held. Rather, I had taken the short cut: I was content to believe what I thought sophisticated and enlightened people believed, or at least were supposed to believe. I simply, and rather unselfconsciously, assumed that an approach of that sort would reliably place me on the correct side of the issues. And, of course, it would give me access to a world I wanted to enter more fully—the elite world of important people who really counted and made a difference. If I got the right credentials, beginning with a Swarthmore degree, and held the right views, I could be someone who mattered. It was then, as it is now, a common motivation for students at elite colleges and universities.

Nevertheless, I wasn’t completely blind to problems on the left. I saw cases—they could scarcely be missed—of self-indulgence masquerading as principle or courageous defiance of social norms. And I was not entirely comfortable with the harder leftward turn being taken by the liberal movement and the Democratic Party in the 1970s, especially on what we now call “social issues.” The movement and the Party were becoming quite unlike what they were when their leaders were people like Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, and Hubert Humphrey. Still, I was a partisan Democrat and a loyal center-left liberal. I attended the 1976 Democratic National Convention as an alternate delegate and was happy with the nomination of the moderate Jimmy Carter and

the liberal Walter Mondale as the Party's national ticket. But even then, I was in the midst of a major rethinking of, well, everything. The triggering event was one I mentioned at the Collection with Professor West. I had encountered Plato's dialogue *Gorgias* in a political theory course taught by Professor Sharpe. It made me realize that I hadn't actually been thinking much at all. I had views, but I was scarcely entitled to them. I was a skilled debater, but skilled in talking for victory, not for truth. I regarded my interlocutors, especially those with whom I had partisan or ideological differences, as adversaries, not as partners in the quest for knowledge and wisdom. My arguments did not reflect any actual thinking that had gotten me to where I stood on this issue or that; rather, they were offered as justifications for positions I held for all sorts of questionable reasons: tribal loyalty, personal preference, applause, the wish to be and be seen to be sophisticated, the desire to fit in with others at the College and in elite sectors of the culture generally. Plato taught me that I was in need of serious intellectual reform.

My views did not change overnight—though my attitude did. But they did change. At least they changed on some pretty important issues. By 1980, five or so years after my encounter with Plato, people to my left started describing me as a “conservative.” It took me another decade to accept the label—and even then I accepted it only grudgingly. Tribal loyalties (and labels) are even less easily abandoned than they are acknowledged. In some cases, what changed was not my view of the ends that ought to be pursued, but rather the best means for pursuing them. Observing, first with concern and then with anxiety, what was happening in my native Appalachia, I grew skeptical of the general approach to fighting poverty that had traditionally been favored by the Democratic Party. It became clear to me that what were needed were fewer direct government anti-poverty initiatives and greater efforts to support and rebuild institutions of civil society. I saw happening in the hills and hollows of central and southern West Virginia and eastern Kentucky what had been happening in places like inner city Detroit. And well-intentioned policies seemed to be making the situations worse rather than better. Trying honestly and dispassionately to think my way through things, I found myself increasingly impressed by what I was reading by “conservative” writers such as Irving Kristol, Daniel Patrick Moynihan (who, when he wasn't holding a pen in his hand, remained a liberal Democrat), and James Q. Wilson. To my surprise, I found greater insight and wisdom in *The Public Interest* than in the *New York Times* or *Dissent*. It was a bit unnerving—since I did not know where this train was taking me—but also exhilarating. I was being persuaded by arguments, and I was beginning to think critically and for myself. The desire to “be

sophisticated” and to “fit in” with my peers and other “enlightened” people no longer mattered to me. I was free.

On reflection, my religious beliefs strengthened and became both more orthodox and more ecumenical. That might seem paradoxical from a liberal secularist viewpoint, but won’t seem at all odd to people who know what the Catholic Church actually teaches in, for example, the documents on religious liberty, ecumenism, and the world’s religions of the Second Vatican Council. My pro-life convictions also strengthened, as my understanding of the arguments on competing sides deepened, and I found myself embracing a more conservative set of ideas on other moral and social issues, as well. Thinking about abortion and infanticide (Michael Tooley had published his famous article linking and defending the two practices just before I arrived at Swarthmore), I eventually came also to reject euthanasia and the death penalty. The last of these positions did not endear me to my new conservative allies, but I had long since stopped caring about anything other than whether the weight of reason and argument supported a position or failed to support it. The idea that one would hold a belief, or not consider changing a belief, out of partisan or tribal loyalty no longer had purchase with me.

Ultimately, the great intellectual gift Swarthmore gave me was the one I have already described: a confrontation with an old Greek who awakened me from my dogmatic slumbers and made me a free man. My *contemporary* guides for the journey on which that confrontation launched me were two extraordinary members of the Swarthmore faculty who were models of intellectual integrity and rigorous, critical thinking: James Kurth, who taught me in several political science courses, and Linwood Urban, with whom I studied medieval philosophy and philosophy of religion. They were my mentors. My debt to them can never be repaid. The best I can do is to try to be the very best mentor I can be to my own students (whom I regard as their intellectual grandchildren).

Swarthmore was, in those days, the ideal place for someone like me. There was, to be sure, a dominant ethos—one very much to the left—but it did not crush the spirit of those of us who found ourselves led by the logos into dissent. Orthodoxies were not enforced. There were no speech codes, nor were people subjected to what J.S. Mill describes in *On Liberty* as “the moral coercion of public opinion.” A spirit of liberty of thought and discussion prevailed, a spirit of the sort described by the great jurist Learned Hand of “not being too certain one is right.” People at the College who refused to conform to left-liberal opinion on this or that issue were not subjected to name-calling or accused of having nefarious motives. One could expect to be challenged,

that's for sure, but one could also freely challenge dominant beliefs. The currency of discourse consisted of reasons and arguments, and if one was prepared to offer reasons and make arguments one was welcome to hold and defend one's views, even if they deviated from—or offended—the sensibilities of those whose views were widely shared. There were, to be sure, a few dogmatists around—mainly of a Marxian stripe—who were sure they had all the answers and would write off those who weren't buying their doctrines as ignoramuses and tools of the capitalist class. But they were a small minority, even among students and faculty on the left edge of the spectrum, and they had no real power to stigmatize dissenters or bully people into acquiescence or silence.

In thinking about what I “got out of” my time at Swarthmore, I would certainly have to add great life-long friends and, especially, musical companions (since music was a big part of my life at the College). My friends (and musical companions, who, as it happens, were called the “Friends”) included, just as they include today, people of a vast range of views about politics, religion, and even morality. I've never been able to see why some people suppose you can't be friends with people who disagree with your beliefs and actions and why they can't be friends with you. I guess I didn't get the gene that limits the possibility of friendship to people with whom one basically agrees. At Princeton, I have close friends who don't approve at all of some things I think and do, just as I don't agree with some things they think and do. Mutual respect and even affection is possible despite strong political disagreement, at least where those disagreeing are reasonable people of goodwill who, on the basis of honest reflection, find themselves in different places on political, religious, or moral questions.

Mutual respect between persons with different ideologies does not preclude us from wanting to work for reform in the academy and society. For many people, the essential first step is to stop living one's life in an ideological echo chamber. Break free. Read the work of serious thinkers who espouse ideas that are contrary to one's convictions. For me, that means reading—in an open-minded, self-critical way—thinkers like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Hume, Bentham, Nietzsche, and Foucault. For others, it might mean reading Plato, Augustine, Burke, Anscombe, and Gandhi. And for everyone, it is important not to surround oneself with people who simply reinforce one's pre-conceived notions. Hang out with at least some people who thinking differently, and who will question one's presuppositions, assumptions, and prejudices. A—perhaps *the*—central virtue in the truth-seeking and wisdom-seeking enterprise, the enterprise of the great teachers of mankind from Socrates to Gandhi, is

intellectual humility, a virtue that is impossible without the real (and not merely notional) acknowledgment of one's fallibility—the recognition that even when it comes to important matters, matters on which one is deeply emotionally invested in one's opinions, one could be wrong. One's pat answers, so satisfying emotionally, might be woefully inadequate from the rational vantage point. From my own experience, I would say that a particular danger to avoid is that of believing in the idea of self-validating experience. When it comes to things we really care about and treat as identity-forming (religious beliefs are an example, but there are many others), it is a serious temptation—and a grave danger. It serves as an excuse for the practical belief that on those issues one is, in fact, infallible. It makes genuine intellectual humility impossible and is therefore toxic to the pursuit of knowledge.

The main thing in considering a competing viewpoint is this: openness to the possibility of its validity. If that possibility is closed off in advance, then one is talking for victory, not truth. Argument is reduced purely to a rhetorical business. The questions we ask our interlocutors are mere “gotcha questions” designed to embarrass or intimidate. We are in the domain of sophistry (in the literal sense). If, by contrast, we practice the virtue of intellectual humility, we will regard and treat our interlocutors not as enemies, but as our truest friends. They are friends precisely because they challenge our beliefs and question their presuppositions. If we are in error, they can help lead us in the direction of truth. If we are on solid ground, engaging people who disagree will deepen and enrich our understanding, even if they are the ones in error. Even people who profoundly disagree can form what Professor Cornel West and I call “the bond of truth seeking.” It can provide a secure basis for deep friendship—friendship built around the collaborative (if dialectal) pursuit of a common objective, a common good.

For example, I have been asked: “Take an issue such as the nature of marriage? You've got a view on the subject, and you've defended it vigorously in your writings and in public debates. What would it take to persuade you that your view is incorrect?” The answer is that I can be persuaded by the same thing that it would take to persuade a reasonable person of goodwill on the other side of the question to revise his view, namely, a persuasive argument, one that is accurate in its descriptive premises, applies sound normative principles, and draws logically warranted inferences while avoiding unwarranted ones. I have presented my arguments on marriage and related questions in detail in books and in articles in prominent journals. And I have regularly engaged intellectually impressive critics—Kenji Yoshino, Stephen Macedo, Andrew Koppelman, and others—explaining why I believe their arguments

ultimately do not succeed and offering criticisms and challenges to their own positions that I am waiting for them to meet. I have also worked through the sources, from Freud and Reich to Kinsey and Marcuse, from which many of the premises of contemporary liberal positions on marriage and sexual morality are drawn. As I said at the Collection, I am inclined to think that writers like Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Gandhi, and Anscombe are more reliable guides on these questions. But perhaps someone will persuade me of the unsoundness of that judgment. To close off that possibility would be to succumb to dogmatism. The same, of course, would be true of people on the other side who closed off the possibility that they are wrong about marriage and sexual morality. Fallibility places all of us in the same boat.

I am friends with persons who holding competing views from my own, including some people I've mentioned. Some, like Professor Macedo, are close friends as well as interlocutors. When he was being considered for an appointment at Princeton, I strongly argued in favor of it because of my respect for his intellectual ability and honesty and my belief—correct as it turned out—that he would be a formidable critic of my arguments in the area of sexual ethics. He is one of the best scholars in the field, and I'm honored that he reciprocates my regard for him as a thinker and as a person. The bond of friendship between us enables us to explore these matters more deeply than is ordinarily possible when strangers are questioning each other's deeply held, sometimes deeply personal, beliefs. My exchanges with these friends, some of which are in written and published form, others of which occur over meals or coffee, have deepened understanding and improved the quality of the arguments on both sides. That's what happens when people, despite their differences, unite in the common pursuit of knowledge and wisdom—when they argue for truth, not victory. This unity of purpose among interlocutors is especially important when the issues are difficult ones that have occupied history's greatest thinkers about morality and the human condition from antiquity to the present.

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