

## Critical discussion versus taking offence

The Cranky Professor

*The Journal*, the campus newspaper at Saint Mary's, Vol. 75, No. 24, 31 March 2010

Mark Mercer

Department of Philosophy

Saint Mary's University

Halifax, NS B3H 3C3

(902) 420-5825

[mark.mercer@smu.ca](mailto:mark.mercer@smu.ca)

"It is, in fact, an expression of disdain and bigotry. If such a statement were quoted in a text about the future Palestinian state, it would be condemned as racist."

"It is the height of arrogance that the BHA would even assume to tell people not to instruct their children in the religion. It is reprehensible and so typical of the hypocrisy of the British Humanist Association today. They have a defeatist attitude and are just trying to draw attention to themselves."

"The premier's comments are unprofessional, misleading and irresponsible. He owes the residents of Western Newfoundland and Labrador, Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, and especially Holly Pike, an apology."

"To suggest to New Brunswick's young women that their only role in society and their only contribution to the New Brunswick economy is to have babies is demeaning and outdated thinking."

None of the speakers of these sentences states an argument intending to show that the offending position is false. The speaker is concerned to denounce the view as racist or arrogant or unprofessional or demeaning, but not to explain how it is either false or poorly supported by argument or research.

That this sort of thing is as common as it is speaks to a widespread failure of universities and university professors to do what they should be doing. Maybe we're trying to do what we should be doing but the cultural and other pressures against us are too strong. Or maybe we're not trying hard enough. In either case, we're failing.

What we should be doing is creating critical thinkers. We should be creating people who care primarily about whether the claims they hear are true, and who seek to test whether they are true through argument and research. Critical thinkers don't much care about labels such as "racist" or "sexist" or "arrogant." They want to know what is true and what is false—or, at least, which claim has the weight of argument on its side.

Actually, the task of a university isn't to create critical thinkers, but rather to enable those who want to be critical thinkers to be good ones. Whether a student embraces the values and attitudes of a critical thinker is her own business. A university gets her to see what it's like to be passionately dispassionate about argument and inquiry, and then leaves it to her.

The joys and rewards of being a critical thinker, though, are many and compelling. For that reason, it's unlikely that people schooled in critical thinking would choose not to think critically. That public discourse in our country and even in our

universities is marked by displays of offence, charges of arrogance or hypocrisy, and demands for apologies, then, rather than by critical investigation and discussion, is strong evidence of our failure.

One of the joys of being a critical thinker is that one is never offended. That's not to say that a critical thinker is never upset or hurt by the course of events or what she hears. But because her attention is on the claims themselves and the arguments for and against them, the question whether the claims are offensive doesn't interest her. Since she doesn't care, she cannot be offended.

That someone compares abortion to the Holocaust, for instance, is a matter of indifference to her. She is interested only to evaluate that person's arguments against abortion.

On the other hand, an almost sure sign that a person isn't thinking critically is her inclination to exclaim "That's offensive!"

How are we to go about the task of creating critical thinkers? One place to begin is in the classroom. Just as all arts courses should be English courses, so, too, all university courses should be critical thinking courses. That is, they should be courses in which the truth of theses and theories, and the soundness of arguments and research, are our primary topics. When in a class someone complains that something or other is offensive, we may without doing much harm nod sympathetically once or twice, but then we must turn to the real matter at hand. We must turn back to considering whether the claim in question is true or well supported.

We must teach by example. If we show that we don't care one way or the other whether something is offensive, we'll be indicating to our students a definite path. They might well, then, choose to walk that path with us.