

281. Respect the University

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My university, Saint Mary's in Halifax, Nova Scotia, makes a lot of noise about respect. We have a Safe and Respectful Saint Mary's working group that issues reports and recommendations now and again, a Policy on Conflict Resolution that directs members of the university community to contribute to a respectful environment, and even a senate-approved Declaration of Respect. People who believe they have been treated disrespectfully are encouraged by our administrators to file complaints.

Saint Mary's is no different from other universities. Almost all universities officially proclaim respect to be a core campus value. And who could be against respect?

There are two problems here, both of which are having baleful effects on research, teaching, and critical discussion at my university and at others.

The first problem is that an institution cannot respectfully require that people be treated with respect. That is, ordering someone to treat others respectfully is disrespectful. Universities that mandate respect, then, are like a fraught father directing his children to "do what I say, not what I do."

The second problem is that these policies smuggle into university documents conceptions of respect that are at odds with the essence of a university. Their understanding of respect is limited to esteem, acceptance, and care for people's feelings. My understanding of respect, one shared by many academics, concerns intellectual and moral autonomy.

A person is intellectually autonomous to the extent that they hold their beliefs based on evidence and argument.

Suppose you believe that multicellular species evolve primarily by means of natural selection. You believe this because you are interested in the question of how species come to be and how they come to be as they are. You have done some research into the matter and the thesis that natural selection is the main force driving evolution seems to you to be a powerful explanation supported by evidence.

Suppose instead, though, that you believe this thesis because you would rather not appear ignorant or stupid in front of your peers or your betters. Your belief that species evolve by natural selection is, in that case, not an expression of intellectual autonomy. You believe it not because you think it is true but because it serves your interests to believe it.

Now for moral autonomy. A morally autonomous person is happy to value what they do. Treating people with respect is an expression of your moral autonomy when you are happy to treat people with respect. You are not morally autonomous, with regard to respect, when your respectful actions are supported by your desire either to curry favor or to avoid penalty.

To treat a person respectfully in this traditional sense is to engage with them openly and candidly under the assumption that they are concerned about the truth of the matter and are able to evaluate for themselves your critical opinions. To treat a person disrespectfully, on the other hand, is to manipulate them into forming the beliefs and other attitudes you wish them to form. Manipulating someone into a belief or feeling is disrespectful even when it is done benevolently, and even when the person wishes to be manipulated into a pleasant belief or good feeling.

A respectful person offended by what another has said won't, then, voice that offense, for voicing it would be to attempt to move another by means that bypass evidence and argument.

One reason for having universities is that they are places in which people who value intellectual and moral autonomy, their own and that of others, can come together to investigate, interpret, and appraise things of the world. People will be able to trust research generated by such universities and they will prize university graduates as people able to think for themselves.

While the concept of respect as the commitment to treat others as intellectually and morally autonomous is still acknowledged in recent university policies and guidelines, a very different concept also appears in them. This version of respect requires honoring and protecting the identities and feelings of people, even celebrating them.

This second concept inhibits critical investigation. Looking critically at people's identities and feelings can hurt and disturb. This version of respect directs us instead to validate identities, to be concerned for feelings, and to react with horror to the idea of giving offense.

Honoring identities and feelings can require that we patronize people and coddle or mollify them. And to patronize or coddle a person assumes they are not morally or intellectually autonomous. The second concept of respect would have us treat our students, our colleagues, and the administrators of our universities disrespectfully, as understood in the traditional concept.

I mentioned above that the directive "treat others respectfully" cannot be uttered respectfully, at least not if those who ignore it face discipline or sanction. We at universities who value intellectual and moral autonomy will treat others respectfully simply as part of our concern to understand the world. It is not a side-constraint that needs to be imposed on us from without.

On the other hand, the injunction to account for the emotional wellbeing of others as one pursues understanding has to be backed with force, for it runs counter to every inquisitive, critical, and disputatious inclination of true academics.

If our universities are now off-track, as I think they are, it is to a large degree because care and concern for identities and feelings has replaced respect for intellectual and moral autonomy, and thus for our personhood.

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