Persuade or Be Persuaded

Agnes Callard

June 5th & 7th, 2019

I write to the sound of drums beating and people chanting just outside my window. The graduate students are on strike, and I have crossed picket lines to be in my office. Later today, I will cross them again to teach my class. Many students will not show up to class, some of them may be in the picket line. But we are behaving civilly: they do not physically prevent me from entering buildings, and I respect their right to protest. After the strike, education will resume as usual.

It says something about the concept of civility that our behavior qualifies as such. For instance, civility can't amount to mere politeness. Shouting and banging is not polite; nor am I manifesting many social graces in my response to it. Likewise, if civility were agreeableness or friendliness, our interactions would not count as civil: they are not smiling at me, I am not smiling at them. But civility runs deeper than politeness, friendliness or agreeableness.

I think what we mean by civility is: respect for the another person's distinct perspective. Such a perspective is both a source of benefit—a font of new ideas—and a constraint on intrusion—your interlocutor has a right to her own opinion. You may offer your arguments, but it is, at the end of the day, up to her to make up her own mind. Civility is rooted in the freedom of thought, which sets each of us as sovereign ruler over the private kingdom of our mind. It entails being able to agree to disagree.

Civility in this deeper sense might seem unobjectionable, but in fact there is someone who objects to it: Socrates. Readers of Plato often come away with the impression that Socrates is aggressive, hostile, tricky, relentless, sophistical and arrogant. Even when he acts nice, they think he's actually, secretly, being mean: ironic, insincere, manipulative. As a staunch defender of the Socratic Way, I must nonetheless acknowledge that this negative impression has some basis in the truth: Socrates has an abnormally invasive conversational agenda.

Civility encourages us to approach conversation as a kind of potluck. If you bring your arguments to the table, and I bring mine, each of us stands to find something of value on offer. Even if no one's mind is changed, the encounter passes enjoyably enough: no one tries to shove anything down anyone's throat; everyone is correspondingly polite about what she turns down: "No aspic for me, thanks!" The great thing about ideas is that I don't lose what you take from me, so the more sharing the better.

If you anticipated such a positive sum exchange, Socrates's efforts to bend you to his argumentative will come off as downright violent. For instance, consider what happens when Protagoras tries to avoid saying whether he thinks justice is pious: "What's the difference? If you want, we'll let justice be pious and piety just." Socrates has none of it: "Don't do that to me! It's not this 'if you want' or 'if you agree' business I want to test. It's you and me I want to put on the line, and I think the argument will be tested best if we take the 'if' out."

Socrates doesn't let you choose what you bring to the table. Nor does he let you choose what you eat: his refutations snatch plates out from under the noses of his interlocutors, trashing their carefully prepared contributions. The *Gorgias* ends with a list of all the beliefs he has managed to force-feed his interlocutors.

Why won't Socrates let people draw their own conclusions? What looks like an aggressive impulse—extracting concessions, rubbing their faces in their defeat—is actually a collaborative one. Attempts at cognitive collaboration are liable to feel like an invasion of your personal space when you are used to seeing your mind as even more private than your body. Socrates's rejection of mental integrity is most evident when the stakes are highest. After Socrates has been sentenced to death, the day before he is to be executed, his friend Crito desperately tries to induce him to escape. Socrates responds:

Let us examine the question together, my dear friend, and if you can make any objection while I am speaking, make it and I will listen to you, but if you have no objection to make, my dear Crito, then stop now from saying the same thing so often, that I must leave here against the will of the Athenians. I think it important to persuade you before I act, and not to act against your wishes.

Socrates thinks that he has to either convince Crito or be convinced by him. And vice versa: throughout the dialogue, Socrates reiterates that Crito must persuade or be persuaded. Those are the only options Socrates thinks anyone ever has.

We might agree with Socrates that there are arenas that work like this. For instance if we are co-teaching a class, I cannot change the syllabus without consulting you; if we're buying a car together, we must agree on our budget; if we're playing poker, we need to decide on the rules. In such cases, I don't have complete autonomy; instead you and I must proceed by agreement. At a general level, democracies determine many features of communal life by way of some form of agreement. Nonetheless, we tend to think of those agreements as framing an inner sphere of freedom in which we are allowed to act as we see fit, without securing another's permission; moreover, we rarely need permission to *speak* as we see fit; and we never take ourselves to need permission to *think* as we see fit.

Socratic philosophy targets that innermost sphere. It challenges freedom of thought, by proposing agreement as the way to proceed not only in (some cases of) action, but also in (all cases of) speech and thought. Neither of us is allowed to hold beliefs on any matter where she cannot produce conviction in the other. Persuade or be persuaded, those are the only options.

Now Socrates himself would object to being labeled an opponent of civility. Socrates always prefers to turn the linguistic tables: he'd insist that his oddball gadfly approach amounts to *true* civility. He might point out that etymologically the word "civility" comes from the Latin *civis*—citizen—and that the demand to think by agreement couldn't be more citizenly: it proposes to settle all questions by the method appropriate to political ones. So who is right? Which is the true civility, his kind or ours?

Because "Socratic civility" takes refutation as its modus operandi, it makes people angry. People felt hurt and disrespected by what Socrates did to them, and eventually they killed him for it. One might argue, against Socrates, that it is more truly civil to live and let live.

The problem comes when you can't: Abortion. Universal health care. Immigration. Taxation. Facebook privacy. Sexism. Racism. Transphobia. Prisons. Poverty. Education. Unions. When one of our perspectival differences becomes a load-bearing political question, the idea of agreeing to disagree doesn't work anymore. If each of us accepts that at the end of the day we cannot change one another's minds, and each of us also thinks that in this case *things must go my way*, we are in quite a bind.

That is the bind I'm in. I've been called upon by the union to cancel class to accommodate the strike. But, as I see it, that would amount to using educational harms to undergraduates as an instrument to achieve graduate students' ends. Such an action seems immoral to me, for reasons articulated by Immanuel Kant: you are not allowed to use people merely as a means. But what if I am wrong? What if my perspective is incorrect? Emails from many students convince me that they are torn, as well. I thought: let us approach this philosophically, by gathering in a classroom, some evening this week, and debating the ethics of striking.

For the first time in my decade of teaching at the University of Chicago, I have encountered resistance to a proposed university event on account of content. I was told I should check with higher ups. I was told that this is not the right time to have this conversation, because tensions are high. "The strike is the conversation." What if I am perceived as discouraging union activity? What if that sours my relations with graduate students? What if it tarnishes the name of my event series?

I am lucky enough to work in one of the most intellectually open places the world has ever known. The pressures are not strong enough to stop me from holding my event. But they are there. The dark secret of un-Socratic civility is that it cannot avoid holding force in reserve. The force may be physical; it may involve damaging rhetoric; it may involve leveraging social pressures to exclude an undesirable viewpoint. One way or another, we stop listening.

Un-Socratic civility is sunshine and smiles until it isn't. It threatens to plunge us into darkness as soon as we decide "this time, it actually matters." For all its relentless, aggressive intrusiveness, Socratic civility does have the virtue of refusing to allow our violent impulses extraconversational expression.

Socrates wouldn't respect the point of view of the protesters outside his window. He would want to know who is right and who is wrong, and he wouldn't stop talking to them until the difference between points of view was obliterated. Persuade or be persuaded.

Appendix: Whose University?

A response to Agnes Callard

By David Kretz

This article is in part a response to Agnes Callard's column, "Persuade or Be Persuaded," which discussed the recent labor action at the University of Chicago, in

which hundreds of graduate students withheld their labor for three days and picketed dozens of buildings. It comes from a rank-and-file organizer who has walked the pickets for thirty hours in these last days and it also comes from someone who has spent the last decade or so of his life doing philosophy and, like Callard, very much affirms the Socratic ideal of examining one's life for oneself.

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Agnes Callard's column raises a question. During this week's labor action at the University of Chicago, Callard crossed picket lines to teach her classes, and she asks whether she did right by doing so. Then on Thursday, after the action ended, she held an event to debate this question with students and faculty. There are over eight hundred people on Twitter, and not a few of my colleagues, who think the question is ludicrous, a kind of high-brow trolling coming from an attention-seeking scab. They think good faith cannot be presumed here and no debate is possible. I want to acknowledge, however, that it takes a certain courage to out yourself as a strike-breaker and put your position up for discussion.

Second, there can be value in debate even where the other party does not argue in good faith for at least two reasons. Where the debate is public, it can help onlookers who are on the fence about the issue. Most importantly, spelling out what we think is right, justifying our convictions, is addressed as much to others as to ourselves. We might only rarely be able to change an opponent's mind in a debate. But if we want to remain justifiably convinced of the rationality of our own convictions it is essential that we have replies ready to their challenges.[1] Presuming good faith, I take myself to be addressing the three parties equally here: those who oppose the action, those who are undecided about it, and those who support it.

To cut to the chase, Callard has, as far as I can see, one central argument against the action. She writes:

> I've been called upon by the union to cancel class to accommodate the strike. But, as I see it, that would amount to using educational harms to undergraduates as an instrument to achieve graduate students' ends. Such an action seems immoral to me, for reasons articulated by Immanuel Kant: you are not allowed to use people merely as a means.

Did the grad students throw the undergrads under the bus, immorally instrumentalizing them for their own ends? The challenge has an empirical and a normative dimension, and my answer will try to address both. Empirically, the undergrads overwhelmingly supported the action and—the normative part—they did so with good reasons. They were not simply collectively deluded about their interests or confused in their sense of what is right.

[1] Alasdair MacIntyre has made this point on many occasions, building on Charles S. Peirce.

A good place to begin is by pointing out that every teaching grad student who went out on the pickets and withheld their labor had a conversation about this with their students before and often several conversations over the course of the last year. I have done several teach-ins myself, in various departments, in lecture halls and seminars, to tell undergrads about our cause. I have not encountered a single undergrad who did not show understanding and sympathy for it, often even enthusiasm.

Hundreds of undergrads have signed our solidarity petition. I have been on the picket lines ten hours a day for all three days. On every picket I have walked, undergrads walked with us. On every picket I have walked, undergrads brought food to the protesters, cookies they baked themselves sometimes and water when the sun was burning hot on Wednesday. Undergrads gave speeches in support of our cause at our lunch rallies alongside politicians and activists from all over Chicago. They wrote op-eds in the campus newspaper, the *Maroon*, and elsewherein support. They emailed their administrators in support. They donated to our strike support fund. Their unions and activist organizations have declared their solidarity with us.

Is this evidence anecdotal? Admittedly, I do not have a statistic about the total share of GSU support among undergrads. Dissenting voices have made themselves heard, too. But there is an argument to be made that structurally grad students are in a good position to know where the undergrads stand. Two of my colleagues who picketed with me were Resident Heads in undergrad dorms. They have lived side by side with their students, sat through mental-health crises with them, accompanied them to the ER, laughed together in the dining hall. Is it at all surprising to see those undergrads turn out to the picket lines for the people who have been there for them? How many undergrads do our top-level administrators know personally, I wonder?

A philosophically minded person might counter that, sure, the undergrads supported you, but were they right to do so? Socrates thought the Athenians were wrong about all kinds of things. The response, in essence, is that the grad students' working conditions are the undergrads' learning conditions. An improvement to one is an improvement to the other and fighting to improve one is fighting to improve the other. When we ask the university to invest in its grad students, we ask it to invest in its teachers. Our undergrads understand that our interests are fundamentally aligned. GSU would not have gone forward with this action if we had not known that the undergrads had our back. They are not being instrumentalized; they are with us—and they know why they are.

What was the meaning of the labor action and what is the meaning of GSU on this campus? Callard has opened herself up to very personal critique, and I do not want to shirk from it either, so allow me some more personal reflections. When I arrived in Chicago last September to begin graduate study, the overwhelming feeling was gratitude. I get to study at a world-class institution following in the footsteps of

some of the teachers and scholars I most admire. People will pay me to do what I love! At the very start of my career, I made as much money as my parents started to make only quite late in theirs.

I had moved to the United States from continental Europe and had grown up in Austria, where collective bargaining is standard and, despite it all, the welfare state is still fairly robust, compared to here. Even conservatives in Austria agree that universal health care, for example, is just part of civilization, not a communist plot. So, the things the union asked for seemed only reasonable and, new in town, I was glad to join a cause. Over the following months, I became more involved. I handed out flyers on campus, learned how to organize. I went to labs all over campus, to buildings I might not have otherwise set a foot into for my entire time here. I made friends in every division of the university, listened to people's struggles in their workplaces, and helped people see that they are not alone in their fights. I learned to be a marshal at rallies, keeping parades on track and marchers safe from cars and, in recent days, I learned how to drum and chant and lead a picket, giving voice to righteous anger without hatred; how to keep one's humor light and the energy up when you're walking ten hours, come rain, come shine.

Like Callard, I also asked myself at times whether I was not wrong about some things. Do I not bite the hand that feeds me? Was causing a stir imprudent and, worse, ungrateful? Socrates, of course, embodied that problem. He caused a stir until the Athenians put him to death. He claimed that all his criticism was, in truth, the expression of a profound loyalty to the Athenian community. He insisted that he was doing them a favor when he relentlessly criticized their views. I would claim the same for my dissent. The University of Chicago is great, and some things about it could be even greater. Smiling and agreeing to disagree will not make things better. Here, I am in complete agreement with Callard. There might be a disagreement about means between us. As far as I know, Socrates never organized to improve the material conditions and institutional shape of life in Athens. He talked to people. If I read Callard right, she thinks that Socratic conversation and protesting—speaking and acting—are two fundamentally different things and the latter an inferior mode of settling political questions, perhaps an inadmissible one in the case at hand.

I think that politics is inseparable from both speech and action. Yet there is a more profound question here. Athens might have been a highly exclusionary political community, pushing slaves, women and foreigners to the margins, but there is no doubt that it was a political community where people came together to act for and deliberate about the common good. But is a university a political community in this sense, even in principle? Two alternatives seem to present themselves.

The first objection would be that it is not a political community because it is a business. Thoroughly corporatized, it often seems that, indeed, the only words and deeds—and interests—that matter are those of a few top-level administrators and some billionaires on our board of trustees. Some have suggested, moreover, that GSU's efforts to get grad students recognized as workers would push this corporatization

further. The administration sometimes suggests that recognition of this work as work would harm faculty-student relations. The truth is that GSU did not make up the fact that grad students do unionizable work (most centrally, but not exclusively, teaching)—we're already doing that work. The idea that somehow such recognition would prevent faculty from seeing their students as anything more than soulless, teaching robots is absurd. Human beings can be workers and students at the same time. At UChicago, they already are; they are just not being recognized as both.

The other objection is that universities are neither businesses nor political communities but a third species of institution dedicated to the life of the mind. Why would its members want to engage in tiresome politics? Why not outsource the decision-making to a class of experts so that faculty and students can do their teaching and research in peace? There is no problem in principle with delegating a lot of the day-to-day management to administrators, but to transfer *all* strategic decision-making power to the experts is to condemn oneself to an unfree existence.[2] That cannot be consistently willed. Of course, politics need not be an end in itself. We do not ask that it is. GSU merely wants all those who share in the institution to shape together, as free and equals, the material and institutional conditions in which the life of the mind can flourish. This, I propose, is the meaning of GSU. Nothing could be more citizenly. Every time a group comes together to make their deeds and words matter, chanting "Our university too!," this dream manifests, one step at a time, into reality.

[2] My understanding of the strategic decision-making process at the university might be limited but, from what I can tell, recognition of GSU *de facto* could not come from the faculty but would have to come from the administration. The only thing more outrageous than this, to my mind, is the second-order fact how little outrage there is about this.

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