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Unspeakable Loneliness: Cancel Culture and Education

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Today's society is infected with the disease of "cancel culture." Looking around, it is difficult not to see Raskolnikov's dream in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* as eerily prophetic, describing as it does "a terrible new strange plague" that endows men with "intelligence and will," but which causes every man to attack another, believing himself "so intellectual" and "so completely in possession of the truth" that it is "wretched" to look upon or listen to anyone else. This is our present situation.

Newspaper editors retract stories and opinions simply because of backlash, people lose jobs over what they tweet, colleges silence speakers as students threaten boycotts and violence, and certain scientific research is forbidden before it even starts should it reach conclusions offensive to a particular interest group. For a culture that stresses dialogue, it now seems impossible to discuss any of the things that matter most in life. The unmistakable conclusion is that the modern person is unable to engage in *true* dialogue, especially in this digital age where words are cheap and where it is easy to be selective of what one hears. It is not unsurprising that violence is the result.

So why is it that we fail to communicate with one another? And how should educators, in particular, confront this phenomenon in the classroom? To fulfill their vocation, educators have an obligation to propose an alternative openness to dialogue based on a renewed understanding of the human person, in contrast with the modern failure to truly engage with one another.

The Emptiness of Modern Conversations

In the book *The Coddling of the American Mind*, authors Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt note that the word "safety" underwent a transformation of meaning at the beginning of the 21st century. They observe how in the past, the term primarily referred to physical security and to the protection of bodies from potential danger, risk, or harm. But since then, the meaning of the word has expanded to include emotional safety, so that to care about the safety of students, for example, now means to avoid doing harm to their feelings. The authors also note how the same became true of words such as "harm" and "trauma" and that what we see in this transformation is a "shift to a subjective standard." Emotional comfort is now the criterion of whether one is safe or not. The authors therefore conclude that one of the biggest challenges facing society today is "safetyism," or the idea that safety (which now caters to emotional comfort) is the primary and sacred value of society. The result, according to Lukianoff and Haidt, is decreased tolerance for anything one finds offensive. Consequently, people cancel content that they think is a "danger to their lives" or a "threat to their existence."

But there is a deeper issue at stake here and it lies at the root of why the shift of the meaning of words to a subjective standard is possible and why modern conversations are always doomed to failure. Assumed in this shift to a subjective standard is the Enlightenment philosophy of the self being disengaged from the world. Ever since Descartes' "turn to the subject," the human self has become

detached, worried about building a bridge from one's inner states, thoughts, and feelings, to the external world. The only thing certain for such a person is their own existence, ideas, and feelings, while they remain skeptical of everything in the world around them. The material world is thought to lack any intelligibility of meaning or inherent purpose and is seen as a neutral domain filled with a mechanism of efficient causes through which one can impose one's own purposes and ideas. The result is a completely new understanding of human language.

The premodern self, by contrast, saw the world filled with inherent meaning and purpose that was capable of being known. The world "spoke" to the person and she was able to listen, to receive what the world was "telling" her. In other words, a person could truly grasp the world and therefore was able to speak *of* the world. The mind's grasp of things was called "concepts," but these were not thought to be something wholly internal. Concepts were that through which a person knew the world, a sort of union between the person and external reality.

However, when one understands language from the perspective of a disengaged self, words merely come to signify internal states. Since the world does not have inherent meaning or purpose, because the world does not "speak" to the person, what the person understands are things inside the mind. As John O'Callaghan summarizes Locke's philosophy of language, "The suggestion is that the goal of language is not to communicate directly about extramental things, but to communicate our internal ideas about extramental things." [1]

An implication of this "turn to the subject," and the consequent assumption that there is no objective meaning and purpose in the external world, is the tendency to see words as merely signifying the ideas that a person *imposes* on the world. Since a disengaged self is only certain of ideas, feelings, and other internal states of the mind, words no longer express a knowable world, but simply affirm oneself and one's personal ideas. Words become instruments of power. It is little wonder, then, why "safetyism" comes about. It emerges from the modern understanding of the "I" as first mover and *summum bonum* of humanity. Meanwhile, safetyism's byproduct, "cancel culture," is the reaction against anything that threatens the idea of this "I" being the sole source of meaning in the universe.

Contemporary educators, whether conscious of it or not, are "infected" with this modern understanding of the human person in which "conversations" are reduced to mere self-affirmations. Yet, as every educator knows, a student's ideas or feelings, even of themselves, should never be the ultimate standard of truth or the student's well-being. It is simply not true that every kind of speech that provokes emotional discomfort to the hearer is necessarily bad. Truth is often offensive and an appropriate source of emotional discomfort. Should not a racist hear that all human beings, no matter what race, have equal dignity and should be treated with justice? Should not the fundamentalist Christian hear that Genesis 1 should not be interpreted literally and that the world was not created 6,000 years ago? Should not students who constantly feel badly about themselves be reminded that life is good and beautiful? If anything, students should be told that they are part of something greater and that their uncomfortable feelings do not diminish the value and beauty of their being.

Besides these apparent reasons, the deepest problem of the modern anthropology of the disengaged self is that it sees relationships (to the world, things, people, and God) as products of the human will. Their success or weakness depends on the strength of the efforts put into them. Here we see why modern "conversations" always fail and why political and economic power, not truth, always wins out. Since there is no objective ground besides the will that unites one person to the other, it is always easier to separate from the other whenever circumstances become difficult. Having no profound reason why a person should belong to the other, and particularly when the other is no longer found interesting or

agreeable, the other becomes seen as a threat to one's own ideas and feelings of self-worth. Just as the Cartesian project fails to build a bridge between the mind and the external world, so too do modern conversations fail to bridge the gap between persons. The misunderstanding that a disengaged self generates is the idea of the human person as being somehow lost in a cosmos of their own making. The result is rampant loneliness on an immeasurable scale. And the lonely person is one who is without affection—a violent person, both to oneself and to others.

The Common Ground

The first thing an educator must do to confront this sad state of affairs is to offer a richer metaphysics of the human person. Made in the image of God who is a communion of Divine Persons, the human person is always already related to God, to others, and to the world. He does not need to build a bridge between himself and others because there is already a unity that exists that does not depend on his own thoughts, will, or actions, and there is nothing that he can do or say that will take away this communion in which he already exists.

Christianity proposes that everything is created through and for the eternal "*Logos*" and that therefore each and every created thing has a "*logos*" and is united to all the other "*logoi*" in this eternal source. Every human person has a *logos*, a meaning-word, that only she can say and carry. Each person is also related to the *Logos* and can express the *Logos* in her own unique way, but the *Logos* will always be greater than each particular *logos*; the *logoi* never exhaust the *Logos*. In other words, no person can claim the whole truth, the whole *Logos*, even as they partially express it. This limit is not a defect of the person but brings about the necessity of every person to understand the fullness of truth. This opens the person to a common life since each word or *logos* is necessary to understanding the meaning or *Logos* of existence. If this is indeed true, then each person's attitude towards another should always be that of affection. Dialogue will mean striving to understand the particular word each person carries in relation to *the Word*. Especially in conflicts and deep disagreements, the person will comprehend that there is a greater and deeper communion that exists with the other. True dialogue is not simply affirming that one's own views are correct while others are wrong, but rather uplifting the other in his or her unique relation to the *Logos*, the truth, by affirming and even helping let emerge what the other has to say. In uplifting the other, a person sees how their own self is also uplifted; the other's *logos* has enriched one's own.

This idea of communion-within-difference must be experienced to be understood. One of the privileged places where one experiences this is in education. The school is a place where different persons belong to each other and share a unity of vision and mission. This is why it is important that the faculty and staff be united. Indeed, for students coming from broken families, the school may be the first place where they experience an integration of themselves because of the shared and common life lived out in the classroom. This responsibility falls especially on teachers because it is often they who have a more direct relationship with students.

In the classroom, a teacher must not be neutral to the truth. The gift and task of the educator is to interpret the world and tell the story the world tells. Students learn by seeing the world through the eyes of their teachers and they learn the language of the world in the story their teachers embody and tell through their words, way of listening, gestures, classroom activities, and even grading. What students need to learn is to follow what the teacher is saying, while it is the teacher's role to help students know what it means to follow another. Following what the other is saying means knowing what is said, how it is said, why it is said, why it is relevant to one's life, and what it has to do with the whole world. The purpose of the educator, then, is to let created being speak its *logos*. This means not only disavowing any notion that the world does not have inherent meaning and that one can be neutral

towards it, but also disavowing the idea that teachers can be neutral towards their students. Each student has his or her own unique way of understanding the truth. Being a master of their subject matter (math, literature, psychology, history, etc.), therefore, means being able to articulate what the world has revealed in a way that can be grasped by students so that they too can articulate what they have received in their own way. Educators do not impose their will, but let reality speak.

There is an important lesson that an educator can learn from those who defend free speech against so-called “cancel culture.” Defenders of free speech say there is value in hearing speech that is false, even if it provokes discomfort. Giving voice to such false ideas has value because it is important to know what people believe. For example, it is important that a newspaper publishes a given politician’s perspective, even if it is false and unpopular, because it allows voters to come to know their views and, consequently, decide how to vote. It is important to know what people believe, why they believe it, and how many people believe it, even if the belief in question is false.

Educators should therefore let students voice false ideas even if this causes emotional distress. Here we see why student assessment is important. Teachers need to understand whether their students have been following them. They need to know what their students are thinking, even if these thoughts are wrong. This understanding allows the educator to approach each student in their own unique way, maybe reformulating questions or rethinking lectures so that each student receives the help they need. However, the aim is always for the whole class to come to the truth together. Free speech is free only if it is ordered to the truth. In fact, only if it is true.

The classroom is something quite other than supposedly neutral platforms like social media or the media in general. The classroom is a place where students are always encouraged to bring their deepest questions so that they may receive help to face them and benefit from the gift of others. This happens when students experience being seen by the teacher as a gift. When one is seen as a gift, it allows one to see the other as a gift as well. Naturally, this does not mean there never will be deep disagreements, especially when important things in life are at stake. What deep disagreements reveal is the love of truth each person has. And what a classroom has that social media platforms do not is a unified point of reference, the teacher, who affirms the good that each person carries so that they too can affirm the good of others. To start seeing the other as a good is a path towards reconciliation. The classroom is a place of affection.

What this shows is that there can be no communion without authority. Someone with authority (*auctoritas*) is not someone who has more power than the others, but someone who has the vision of the whole and who can help guide others to grow (*augere*) in the truth. Someone who has authority does not have to be infallible. What is needed is a reference point of unity so that dialogue always begins in a fruitful manner. A mother, for example, is the guide to reconciliation between two quarrelling children. She usually knows more than her children and can understand each child’s point of view. When conflicts arise, what keeps the children from separating is their relationship to their mother and therefore the understanding that they belong to each other. It is in *her* that they find themselves again and begin to discover each other in a new way.

The teacher accompanies parents by embodying this authority outside the home. When students experience that they are essential and a gift to the other (God, the teacher, and their classmates), then they begin to see that the other is essential. The classroom is not necessarily emotionally comfortable (think of the hardest math problem that needs to be solved!), but it is the place where even discomfort can find place and meaning. It is the place where a student can experience the reality that the other is not a threat, but a gift—and consequently, where she dares to take risks because the end is always the

same: moving together towards the truth.

Finally, it is important that the inexhaustibility of the *Logos* be emphasized. There is nothing a student or even the brightest teacher can say that can exhaust the whole meaning the cosmos carries. Even when truth is heard, it is always part of something inexhaustible. And this allows a glimpse into the nature of language: language is always embodied in a shared life and always expresses something more of the world. That is the great truth that is learned from philosophers who speak of language as making “infinite use of finite means” (von Humboldt). There is always the possibility of telling more about the world and there is no sentence or group of sentences or even a book that can totally capture the richness and depth of truth. And yet, this possibility of speaking about the world could not come about without being part of a community that already knows how to speak of the inexhaustible world. What this profound power and limit of language reveal is the *time* necessary to understand the richness of the other and to express what one wants to say and what story the world is telling.

This is why there can never be a “last word” to any discussion. There is a never-ending, always-more to saying and hearing. Hope, therefore, is built into language. One can always look forward to what another person can learn and express it in a new way. Especially when there is deep disagreement, seeing the other person as always ordered to the *Logos* allows one to approach the other with hope. Deep in the other person is a unique word, *logos*, that one can help uplift and let emerge. The classroom can be the place where one is always looking forward to seeing and speaking to each other, where one has the opportunity to affirm the other. The response to cancel culture is an experience of common life where hope radiates.

[1] John O’Callaghan, “The Problem of Language and Mental Representation in Aristotle and St. Thomas,” in *The Review of Metaphysics* 50.3 (March, 1997): 512–513.

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