Is Liberal Tolerance under Threat?

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Introduction

In his book *Liberalism and Its Discontents* (2020), Fukuyama argues that classical liberalism is under severe threat today (p. vii). Although such a claim is alarming, since strongly stated cases are not unusual in academic writing (e.g., Fukuyama once argued (2012) that we had reached the end of history in the sense of arriving at the pinnacle of human organization), on its own, a non-alarmist response seemed to us appropriate. Nonetheless, it prompted us to engage in further reading which, in turn, led us to ponder whether ignoring Fukuyama's claim might, in fact, be unethical. Since, despite our reading, we were still agnostic, it seemed premature to engage in a full-scale study. Instead, we decided to undertake a small informal study of our friends and acquaintances to see, on the one hand, what sort of measuring tool might be used to estimate whether a threat to classical liberalism had seeped into the ordinary everyday attitudes of ordinary everyday citizens, and on the other, whether there was any indication that a more extensive study in the future was warranted. This paper describes that effort.

Measuring a Threat to Classical Liberalism

Though classical liberalism can be defined by its typical characteristics e.g., it is individualistic, egalitarian, and based on reasoned discourse, etc. (Fukuyama, 2020, p. 1), we believe that it is best understood regarding its primary and indeed its revolutionary advantage, namely that this ideology creates a social milieu wherein diverse populations can live peacefully with one another (p. 5). The significance of this advantage is best understood by remembering that liberalism emerged as an ideology in the middle of the 17th century after about a 150-year period of almost continuous religiously inspired violence in Europe that was triggered by the Protestant Reformation (p. 5).[1]

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[1] Luther posted his ninety-five theses on a church door in Wittenberg in 1517 which subsequently led to continuous wars between Protestants and Catholics. It is estimated that about 1/3 of central Europe's population died in the course of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) (Fukuyama, 2020, p.5).

Because the anchoring tenet of liberalism is the *moral primacy of the individual* against the claims of any collective (p. 1), its core value is that all citizens honor the ability of others to make decisions about their own life's course without undue interference from governments or broader society (p. 9), as long as it doesn't result in actual[2] harm to others.

Liberalism's main *raison d'être*, therefore, is the lowering of the aspirations of both political leaders and ordinary citizens by rendering taboo any attempt to *impose* a particular *dogma* on others (p. 6-7). It also carries with it the implication that reasoned respectful *dialogue,* not force, is the appropriate method whereby disagreements regarding collective action are to be resolved. Hence, its fit with a democratic form of governance.

These principles of liberalism—that an individual's private beliefs should be tolerated, and that disagreement should be handled in the arena of the respectful interchange of reasons—are, according to a number of academics besides Fukuyama, under severe threat today by, ironically, ideologies that originally emerged to amplify overall welfare. In their enthusiasm for such laudable ideals as ameliorating the state of the less well off, "progressive" ideologues have become comfortable with insisting that the thinking of all individuals be corralled into a reprint of the "progressive mandate," and thus appear to have made respectful truthful interchange regarding collective action difficult (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020, p. 13).[3]

Since pervasive engagement in "dialogue dampening" strategies would indeed be a threat to classical liberalism, attempting to articulate and informally measure whether those strategies were evident in the local environment became our focus. We viewed this focus on the local environment as particularly important because we lead a Philosophy for Children (P4C) summer camp[4] in which youngsters are encouraged to genuinely hear and reflect on positions that are different from their own. Thus, if we are sending our campers into an environment in which being "open minded" renders them "the enemy," that is something that we need to know to potentially reframe our educational efforts so that campers do not become disoriented if they are villainized for a trait that they (and we) view as admirable.

Our first goal was thus to review the sort of dialogue dampening strategies that various academics have flagged and then attempt to construct a brief questionnaire that might measure support for such dialogue dampening strategies. Our second goal was to try out the measurement tool on our acquaintances to estimate whether it indicated support for dialogue dampening strategies in the local environment.

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[2] In other words, your right to swing your fist ends where another person's nose begins. This saying is often attributed to Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr and is similar to Mill's thesis that harm to others puts a constraint on liberty. It is important, however, that this is understood to refer to *actual* harm. I cannot claim to be harmed because I find your viewpoint offensive.

[3] Talking about the "progressive left," Pluckrose &Lindsay (2020) argue that it is one of the least tolerant and most authoritarian ideologies that the world has had to deal with since the decline of communism and the collapse of white supremacy and colonialism (p. 13).

[4] http://thinkingplayground.org/

In what is to follow, we will thus begin by reviewing the works of several academics who suggest that dialogue dampening strategies are becoming more common. We will then isolate 6 dialogue dampening strategies that seem to be particularly prevalent. We will then briefly outline the parameters of our informal study which suggested that we ought to take the threat to liberal tolerance seriously. We will then suggest, on the basis of this experience, that all educators ought to take seriously the message that *democracy, and the attitudes embodied by liberalism on which it depends, are in need of defence* and that that defence can be nothing other than educating so that all young people develop the habit of engaging in *reasoned inquiry dialogue* with those who hold opposing viewpoints (an educational strategy that is at the centre of Philosophy for Children[5]), with the caveat that the focus of such inquiries need to be relevant and that the point of such engagement, i.e., that dialogue across difference is the life blood of democracy, be made readily apparent. In conclusion, we suggest that the question that has been our focus, i.e., whether liberal tolerance is under threat, is one that should be recognized as in need of further research and reflection, particularly from educators who, we suggest, are morally bound to educate young people in such a way that they are able to keep their way of life—one that is so easily taken for granted—afloat.

Theorizing about "Dialogue Dampening" Strategies

"Dialogue dampening" strategies have been discussed and analyzed by numerous academics from various countries and from different disciplines.

First amendment expert Greg Lukianoff and social psychologist Haidt, in their book *The Coddling of The American Mind: How Good and Bad Intentions Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (2019) deride the culture of self-censorship that has recently emerged because of the terror of being "called out" on social media for even the tiniest of perceived infractions (p. 10). They also bemoan the ever-popular tendency to see the world as divided between good and evil people (p. 53) and go on to quote Mandela (p. 81) who argued that when we dehumanize and demonize our opponents, we abandon the possibility of peacefully resolving our differences, and seek to justify violence against them (Mandela, 2003, p. 545).

As one might expect from the title of their book, *The Coddling of the American Mind* (2019), Lukianoff and Haidt also bemoan the new trend of "trigger warnings" and "safe spaces" by which students have been empowered to request safety from ideas that they find troubling. Lukianoff and Haidt refer to this new educational milieu as "Safetyism" and argue that it deprives young people of the experiences that their antifragile minds need, thereby making them more fragile, anxious, and prone to seeing themselves as victims (p. 32).

An Australian art critic Robert Hughes who, in his book *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America* (1993), argues that the contemporary pervasive tendency to complain is being used primarily

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[5] https://www.icpic.org/

as a tool for emotional bribery (p. 9) and that the dominance of politically correct attitudes is such that only a robust independence of mind can resist them (p. 56-7), and that the use of complaint by both right and left is a way of evading engagement in the real world (p. 67).

British cultural writer Helen Pluckrose and American cultural critic James Lindsay who, in their book *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (2020), fault Critical Race Theory for being racist itself in ascribing profound failures of morals and character to all White people, and for trying to promote the belief that only White people can be racist (because to be racist one must have "prejudice plus power"), that White people should not talk but just listen, and for promoting the clearly self-fulfilling claim that if White people see people in terms of their race, they are racist, and if they are "color blind" they are also racist (p. 121). They argue that this postmodernist stance has become a new kind of religion (p. 198) that protects itself by calling those who attempt to engage with them as suffering from "fragility" or "wilful ignorance" or as engaged in "privilege preserving epistemic pushback" (p. 243).

To this tactic of silencing critics by accusing them of fragility, Irshad Manji, a Ugandan-born, Muslim, lesbian Canadian educator who is also a person of colour[6] (p. 20), argues, in her book *Don't Label Me: How to do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars* (2019), that designating fragility as a "white" condition, rather than a human condition, smacks of a double standard—and a graceless one at that (p. 56). She suggests that we have gotten the promotion of diversity all wrong: we should be focusing on diversity of opinion (p. 7), not appearance (p. 9), and she makes the claim that by indulging in "politically correctness," that "lays bare the diversity movement's disrespect for others" (p. 13), hate has been turbo charged (p. 9) into supporting character assignation (p. 59) and competitive victimhood (p. 60), and in so doing we are bending the arc of history backward (p. 60).

American journalist Charles Pierce who, in his book *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free* (2009), argues that *reasoned* interchange is going the way of the dodo, and notes, quoting Hofstadter, that "intellect is pitted against feeling on the ground that it is somehow inconsistent with warm emotion" and that "it is pitted against character, because it is widely believed that intellect stands for cleverness, which transmutes easily into the sly or diabolical" and that "it is pitted against democracy, since intellect is felt to be a form of distinction that defies egalitarianism" (p. 225). Pierce goes on to make the case that "self-government is a science that requires an informed, educated, and enlightened populace to make all the delicate mechanisms work" (p. 249) but that we have entered an era in which the distinction between truth and popularity has been blurred (p. 268-9), in which the entrepreneurial spirit that used to sell goods is now used to sell ideas (p. 285), and that, in the newly created "idiot America," a collective Gut has developed at the expense of the collective mind (p. 251).

Tom Nichols, a retired professor at the US Naval War College argues, in his book *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Assault from Within on Modern Democracy,* that the citizens of the world's democracies are attacking their own liberties as a matter of their own free will rather than a result of

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[6] Manji suggests that the fact that she is arguing against trying to adopt victimhood status is given credence by the fact that she herself belongs to overlapping categories that would justify claiming superior victimhood status.

foreign conquest (2021, p. xiii) and suggests, ironically, that it seems that the only challenges democracies cannot overcome are peace and prosperity (p. 7). He argues that "in a liberal democracy, citizens are the masters of their fate" and "if we believe democracy has failed us, we should ask ourselves whether we have failed the test of democracy" (p. 8). He thus goes on to claim that "We have met the enemy, and he is us" (p. 9); that no democracy can maintain a good democracy if it must rely on a population of bad citizens (p. 58), but that when we listen only to those with whom we already agree and believe anyone else is wrong as a matter of first principles, we are bad citizens (p. 59). Nichols quotes American Historian Tymothy Snyder (2021) who warns us that when we lose the distinction between what feels true and what is actually true, we concede power to those with the wealth and charisma to create spectacle in its place (p. 171).

Matthew D'Ancona, a British Journalist, also bemoans the global trend of dialogue becoming a zero-sum game rather than a contest of ideas, and goes on to argue, in his book *Post Truth: The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (2017), that the ultimate fatality is the value of truth (2017, p. 8). He notes that "it is not an accident that Oxford Dictionaries selected 'Post-Truth' as its word of the year in 2016, defining it as shorthand for "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (p. 8-9). D'Ancona argues that digital technology has put rocket boosters under existing instincts (p. 50) which results in a general retreat into echo chambers where we accept only information that fits our opinion (p. 49). And he goes on to argue that the consequences of this retreat from truth are potentially catastrophic, and that we should not assume that the survival of civilization, reason and scientific truth is preordained (p. 111) nor should we assume that the values of veracity, honesty and accountability are self-preserving (112). And to those who are indifferent to this issue he warns that "inertia is the safe option—until its isn't" (p. 144).

Lee McIntyre, a research fellow at the Center for Philosophy and History of Science at Boston University argues in a similar vein in his *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance in the Internet Age* (2015) when he makes the claim that "it is not crackpot theories that are doing us in, it is the growing prevalence of a dishonest attitude toward truth which says that one can embrace reason when it suits us and then reject it when the results do not match our preferred ideology" (2015, p. ix). And though he notes that, in tribal situations, evolutionary pressure may have sometimes bent into favoring the use of reasoning to win arguments rather than the pursuit of truth (p. 14), he underscores the value of truth with irony by asking us "Should My Genes Care Whether I Can Justify My Belief That a Tiger Is Coming Toward Me?" (p. 8)

Al Gore, the ex-Vice President of the U.S., also nods to the obvious evolutionary importance of truth, in his book *The Assault on Reason* (2017), when he notes that "When our evolutionary predecessors gathered on the African savanna three million years ago and the leaves next to them moved, the ones who didn't look are not our ancestors" (p. 21). Gore goes on to argue that "the rule of reason is the natural sovereign of a free people" (p. 5) but that this mental muscle of democracy has begun to atrophy (p. 11). He quotes Jefferson who said that once reason is surrendered, like a ship without a rudder, you are the sport of every wind (p. 39). And like the authors above, he argues that the salvation of reason (p. 11) depends on returning to the embrace of John Stuart Mill's claim (1982, p. 120) that truths can only be discovered and refined through the fullest freest comparison

of opposite opinions, and that, therefore, ultimately our democratic way of life depends on the way we communicate with one another (p. 248), with an open mind to co-create a shared wisdom (p. 252), but that this will not be possible unless we accelerate our own psychological, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual evolution (p. 165) and so recover our moral health (p. 210).

Speaking of moral health, American Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning argue, in their book *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and The New Culture Wars* (2018), that, in fact, we have entered a whole new moral era (p. 11). We have left behind the "culture of dignity" that embraced the ideal of individual inherent worth that included an ethic of self-restraint and negotiated compromise (p. 14), and have entered into what they refer to as the "culture of victimhood," in which individuals and groups display a high sensitivity to slight (referred to as microaggressions), have a tendency to handle conflict through complaints to third parties, seek to cultivate an image of being victims in need of assistance (p. 11), and who fail to distinguish between violent offenses and merely verbal ones (p, 15). It is a culture that valorizes the victims and demonizes the privileged, such that the latter can do no right, and the former can do no harm (p. 93). And, like the aforementioned authors, Campbell and Manning are particularly concerned with victimhood's hostility to freedom of speech that takes the form of Social Justice warriors attempting to silence and punish dissidents (p. 190). Our moral life is changing, they argue (p. 27), in a way that jeopardizes our way of life (p. 222), and it is for that reason that it is imperative that we become aware of this censorship-supporting, and hence democracy-endangering, evolution.

In light of all of these theorists, and in particular the call by Campbell and Manning that we are undergoing a kind of invisible moral evolution away from dignity-preserving dialogue, which is the heart of democracy, to one in which dialogue dampening strategies are threatening democracy's very existence, we felt compelled to engage in an informal survey with the view to gathering evidence as to whether these strategies have begun to take root even in our local environment and, therefore, whether a further more robust study was justified.

Measuring the Presence of Support for Dialogue Dampening Strategies

Not unlike hearing that a virus has been unleashed in some foreign country and feeling sad for those others but not in the least concerned for oneself, reading about intolerant attitudes and dialogue dampening strategies in academic books and papers can make them seem intangible in the sense that they seem typical of *other* people, but not something that is common in one's own environment, and hence not something of which one generally needs to be cognizant.

This assumption, however, is just that, an assumption. Thus, given our lackadaisical attitude about an issue that we acknowledge is potentially catastrophic, we decided as a group who all hold respectful dialogue across difference as a core value and who try to import this value to youngsters[7],

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[7] It is of note that we are all lead counsellors in the Philosophy for Children Camp called *The Thinking Playground* http://thinkingplayground.org/ the major goal of which is to give youngsters practice in engaging in effective dialogue across difference.

that we would survey the attitudes of our friends and acquaintances regarding their attitudes toward dialogue dampening strategies.

To do this, we devised a questionnaire that estimated whether there was support for the following dialogue dampening strategies amongst our friends and acquaintances. These strategies are listed below.

1) Diversity, inclusion, and equity (DIE) sessions during which participants are told what they are allowed and not allowed to question,
2) Preventing individuals from speaking if their beliefs stray from the blueprint that activists deem acceptable,
3) The social media cancelling of those perceived as heretics thus preventing the genuine exchange of ideas,
4) Imputing beliefs to individuals based on immutable characteristics thus rendering dialogue unnecessary,
5) The tendency to perceive anyone who has contrary beliefs as evil and thus not worthy of communicative exchange,
6) Accepting that some language claims are a form of violence thus ensuring that such claims are silenced.

An Informal Survey of Young Adults in Western Canada

It is crucial to note that this study does not profess to be of a caliber from which one can make generalized claims about the larger populations. The most obvious shortcomings of the present study are the low sample size, the fact that the subjects were not randomly selected, and the fact that the questionnaire was not tested for validity or reliability. Our goal was entirely personal. Having read about dialogue dampening strategies from several respected authors, we wondered if this tendency was seeping into our own, fairly benign, Canadian social environment. We also wanted to estimate whether a further, more robust study was warranted.

Subjects

Forty-four questionnaires were given out. Of those who completed the questionnaire, 14 were born outside of North America—primarily in India, China, and Iran. The ages ranged from 19 to 64, with 34 under 30.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of six scenarios and subjects were asked to agree or disagree on a six-point scale, with the valence of the questions changing so that some indicated a liberal attitude,

and some indicated an illiberal attitude (see Appendix 1). The questions primarily focused on a will to silence others, being intolerant, and having a disrespectful attitude toward dialogue. There were six questions in all. One question asked whether a participant in a "diversity training" session should have been silenced for disagreeing (silencing); another asked if students were right to force the cancellation of a speaker who argued that indigenous peoples had not been subjected to a genocide (silencing); another asked if it was right to "cancel" someone on social media if they disagreed with the policy of allowing self-identifying trans-females into female washrooms (silencing); another asked if it was problematic for Critical Race Theory to make the claim that all White people are inherently racist (disrespectful + silencing); another asked if a young person was right to move out of her mother's house if she found out that her mother was homophobic (intolerant); and another asked if it was right to discipline a professor if s/he used the "n-word" even if only referring to a book (intolerant).

Process

Scores were reversed on numbers 2, 3,4,6, e.g., 1= 6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3, 5=2, 6=1. The subjects' total scores thus ranged from 6-36. These were then converted to percentages, divided by 36, so the lowest percentage was 17% (6/36) and the highest percentage was 100% (36/36). The higher the score, the higher the "illiberal quotient." The range between 17 and 100 is 83. The **midpoint** between these two numbers[8] is 59 and the **last third**[9] is marked at 72.

Results

 If we examine how many are on the illiberal side of the midpoint, the result was 22 out of 44—which is exactly half. Out of that group, if we take out those over 30 and not born in North America, there are 18 left, of which 16 had higher than midpoint scores or 89%.

If we refine the analysis slightly and look at those in the last third, i.e., the illiberal side, the results show that there were 8 out of 44 who had a score in the last third or 18%. So, the results suggest that in this cohort, and certainly young North Americans, may be being infected by illiberal attitudes. Again, it is important to stress that this was just a pilot project and that the numbers are far too small to make any formal generalizations.

Discussion

The message that one takes away from these results depends on one's expectations. If one believes that one lives in a liberal environment in the classic sense that one assumes that there is a generally-held belief that we all fare better if we tolerate diverse viewpoints (unless it takes the form

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[8] (83/2 + 17)
[9] (83 x 2/3= 55.33 +17)

of hate speech as defined by law) and that we not only tolerate but welcome reasoned and respectful dialogue as the appropriate method whereby disagreements are to be resolved, then one would have presumed that most of the scores would have been *below* the midpoint. This research suggests that this expectation is faulty.

On the other hand, if one presumes, like Fukuyama, that liberalism is under severe threat, one might have presumed that more of our subjects would have been in the last third, so this research did not suggest that this expectation is accurate either. However, though the sample was small and hence the results can't be used to make an accurate generalization, that fact that 89% of young people born in North America had scores on the illiberal side of the scale is troubling.

From an entirely personal perspective, this is worrisome given the generally benign Canadian environment in which we live. It says to us that, even if the threat to liberalism is not as severe as many theorists suggest, there is a troubling trend toward illiberalism that, given the contagion of algorithmically controlled social media, could get significantly worse very quickly.

Whatever else this research tells us, it certainly testifies to the fact that we ought not be complacent about the continuing health of liberalism if we hope that liberalism, and the democratic structure that it supports, survives. And for that very reason, it suggests to us that further research on the extent to which support for dialogue dampening strategies has infiltrated the thinking of democratic citizens is warranted. Also, this informal study combined with the review of literature suggests to us that an education in support of the kind of dialogue that *nurtures* liberal tolerance deserves our loyalty.

Educational Implications

Dewey is calling us from a faraway land and the message that he has been trying to send for some time is that, if an education purports to support democracy, it needs to ensure that young people develop the disposition and the critical thinking skills necessary to engage in effective dialogue *across difference* with their fellow citizens. Dewey is adamant that "a democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (2007, p. 68) and argues that "fuller, freer, and more fruitful association and intercourse of all human beings with one another must be instilled as a working disposition of mind" (2007, p. 76). And he says that "an undesirable society . . . is one which internally and externally sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience" (Ibid) and that "closed-mindedness means premature intellectual old age" (2007, p. 133). Many educators, hearing Dewey's message, have switched gears and, instead of focusing on information transfer, have invested a good deal of energy trying to promote *critical thinking.*

However, we suggest that this may be making a bad situation worse. Now, instead of having a whole lot of people reticent to hear opposing viewpoints, we have a whole lot of people who have critical thinking tools to shut down those with whom they disagree.

Educators who have adopted the *Community of Philosophical Inquiry*[10] (CPI) as their prime pedagogical strategy, on the other hand, seem closer to adhering to Dewey's message in that they give participants practice in hearing and seriously pondering the strengths of the reasons of opposing positions.

Whether or not this form of education truly supports liberalism, however, depends on two factors. The first and most important is whether participants are given practice in inquiring about relevant real-world issues, since it is intransigence on *these* issues that threatens liberal-supporting dialogue. If inquiry is about questions such as "What is art?" or "Are numbers real," since participants are rarely emotionally invested in (or tribally loyal to) the answer, they will get little practice in hearing the reasons supporting positions that they strongly oppose, nor on changing their minds when they are heavily invested on one side. As Dewey points out (2007) students need to have something *at stake* (p. 102) if we are to engage them in genuine reflection (p. 102), since deliberation will be perfunctory and superficial where there is no interest (p. 99).

The second factor that we suggest ought to be added is *to explain to participants that the point of inquiry is dialogue*. Many assume that the point of engaging in dialogue with others is to convince the other of the better view, i.e., theirs. And many are loath to change their minds as they assume that they will be perceived as inferior to the person who holds what they now believe is the stronger position. It is for that reason that participants in a CPI must be told from the get-go that who they are as persons depends on the everyday decisions that they make, and whether those decisions are good decisions depends on how well they are reasoned out. *But* how well they are reasoned out depends on the quality of the dialogue in which one partakes before making any decision, and the quality of the dialogue depends on both one's own ability to state one's initial position succinctly (so that others will listen) and on one's ability to genuinely listen to the reasons of opposing viewpoints and to embrace those viewpoints if they are superior.

Dialogue is difficult. We should not assume that many or even most people engage in the sort of dialogue that moves participants toward a more nuanced and complex understanding of the issue at hand. It is for that reason that we suggest that the bull's eye must be vividly painted so that participants reorient away from winning the battle and, instead, find themselves enthusiastic about getting to better answers.

Take Away Message

In his essay "In Search of Civic Virtue" (2021), Brink Lindsay echoes Fukuyama when he says:

> Liberalism arose in Europe in significant part as a response to the failure of the Wars of Religion to put religious pluralism back in the bottle; after the continent nearly bled

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[10] Communities of Philosophical Inquiry are the prime pedagogical tool of those who practice Philosophy for Children (P4C) https://www.icpic.org/

itself dry in the failed attempt, the liberal *modus vivendi* of freedom of conscience and toleration emerged as the pathway out of the killing fields.

This is liberalism's grand bargain: By learning to live with people who are different from us and whose beliefs we consider erroneous and even wicked, we can take advantage of the immense potential of far-flung specialization and exchange to make each other better off.

Lindsay goes to say that since "we're stuck with each other, . . . the only way to accomplish much of anything is to look past our differences for common ground"; that some level of virtue among both leaders and ordinary citizens is necessary for self-government to be sustainable and that this requires that we see all our fellow citizens as civic and political equals and treat them with respect.

But Nichols, in his book *Our Own Worst Enemy: The Assault from Within on Modern Democracy* (2021), warns us that, rather than living up to that ideal, we have become a troop of ill-tempered toddlers (p. 192); that "instead of acting like adults who have work to do and problems to solve, we now have the leisure to fight with each other over every imagined slight" (p. 192). Of this, Nichols wonders if "maybe liberty really is a problem"; that alone in a world full of bewildering options, human beings will perhaps always prefer the reassurance of the pack and the safety of the herd rather than choose to grapple with the ambiguities and consequences of freedom (p. 196).

In a similar vein, William Davies, a professor of political economy at the University of London, argues, in his book *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason* (2019), that because of mobile technology[11] (p. xiii), the logic of the crowd permeates our everyday life (p. 13), and that logic is now governed by feeling rather than reason and the pursuit of truth (p. 9). Davies notes that in the "attention economy" in which all media outlets are now competing, the expression of outrage attracts more eyeballs than calmness and rationality (p. 21) and, like Fukuyama, Davies argues that the "dialogical insights of the enlightenment" that promoted a style of speaking and arguing which allowed one person to challenge the theoretical statements and reasoning of another, without seeming to challenge his character or intentions (p.51), have run aground (p. xiv). The goal now in public dialogue has become victory, not consensus, something that "requires aggression, solidarity, and a belief in one's own superiority to the point of assuming the enemy's inhumanity" (124).

With these warnings now appearing to us urgent, we would like to conclude this communicative endeavor with a call to our educator-colleagues to join with us in worrying about whether or not this pessimistic attitude is justified. We hope, of course, that we humans are capable of living up to the privilege of freedom and that, once we realize that dialogue *across* difference makes *all* the difference, we will begin not only to alter our ways of communicating with one another but, as well, educating our youngsters so that they develop the habit of eagerly engaging with reasoned viewpoints that are contrary to their own. It is for that reason that we also call on our educator-colleagues to join with us in future research in trying to estimate

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[11] An average smartphone user touches their device 2,617 time a day (Davies, 2019, p. 188).

whether support for dialogue dampening strategies is, in fact, increasing, since we believe that such evidence may help to make present the urgency of our support for genuine *dialogical education.*

Is liberal tolerance *really* under threat? Regarding your local environment, if you cannot, with confidence, answer "NO," we invite you to join us in amplifying the concern for the need to answer (and appropriately respond) to this critical question.

Appendix 1

For Tester

You should say only the following to the participants.

This is a questionnaire that I need to have completed for a course that I am taking. The goal is to get a general understanding of local attitudes regarding contemporary social issues. I would appreciate it if you would fill it out without commenting until it is done. Thank you.

Opinion Questionnaire

Note: Footnotes were not included in the actual survey

Age_____.

Native Language_____.

Country of Birth_____.

Highest level of education_____.

On a scale of 1 to 6, please mark your agreement or disagreement with the following questions.

1. In a recent DIE session, facilitated by a Black woman, a white male questioned whether racism was as bad and systematic as the facilitator claimed it to be, to which the facilitator responded: Do you really think that you in your Whiteness can comment on what is really going on for Black people? [12]

Some have argued that what the Black facilitator said is problematic. Do you agree?

1........................2......................3.........................4......................5.......................6.

Strongly agree.   Strongly disagree.

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[12] Omstead (2013)

2. Mount Royal Professor Frances Widdowson publicly rejected the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's conclusion that Canada's residential school system was "genocidal,"[13] and has been against "the promotion" of Indigenous ways of knowing.[14] She was subsequently fired for these views, though her case is under review. The University of Lethbridge invited her to speak[15] but subsequently cancelled the lecture due to student protest.

Do you agree that the students were right to try and have this lecture cancelled?

1..........................2..........................3...........................4.........................5..........................6.

Strongly agree.   Strongly disagree.

3. Some have argued strongly against the policy of allowing trans women to enter women's bathrooms and changing rooms solely based on self-identification.[16] Such people are often called out as being TERF—trans-exclusionary radial feminists.

Do you support this "calling out"?

1..........................2..........................3...........................4.........................5..........................6.

Strongly agree.   Strongly disagree.

4. Some people fault Critical Race Theorists for saying, for example, that White people are innately hostile and aggressive[17] or that White people have "deeply internalized patterns of domination and submission."[18] Some have argued against Critical Race Theory on the grounds that such claims are problematic.

Do you agree that making such claims is problematic?

1..........................2..........................3...........................4.........................5..........................6.

Strongly agree.   Strongly disagree.

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[13]https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/mount-royal-professor-who-questioned-indigenization-policies-blm-movement-has-been-removed-from-school-staff

[14] https://albertaworker.ca/news/transcript-frances-widdowson-lecture-at-u-of-l/

[15] https://globalnews.ca/news/9447647/lethbridge-lecture-cancelled-frances-widdowson/

[16] https://fairplayforwomen.com/male-free-toilets-and-changing-rooms/

[17] Kendi, I. X., 2019, p. 133,

[18] Diangelo, R., 2018, p. 16

5. Jane overheard her mother tell a friend that she was delighted that Jane finally had a boyfriend because that was proof that her daughter was not a lesbian. Jane felt disgusted by the thought that her mother might be homophobic and decided that if that were true, she might move out.[19]

Do you agree with Jane's viewpoint?

1..........................2........................3.........................4.......................5........................6.

Strongly agree.   Strongly disagree.

6. Do you agree that students ought to be able to request that their teachers/professors be subject to discipline if they use words that they personally find upsetting, e.g., the "n word," even if those words are used to refer to a title of a book rather than a person?[20]

1..........................2........................3.........................4.......................5........................6.

Strongly agree.   Strongly disagree.

Indicate below whether your views tend to align with "the left" or with "the right" or somewhere in the middle.

  1..........................2........................3.........................4.......................5........................6.

Left-wing views.   Right-wing views

Scoring: 6-36.

Note: reverse scores on numbers 2, 3,4,6, e.g., 1= 6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3, 5=2, 6=1.

The higher the score the higher the "illiberal quotient."

For Scoring

Reverse scores on numbers 2, 3,5, 6 e.g., 1= 6, 2=5, 3=4, 4=3, 5=2, 6=1.

Then divide by 36 to give you a percentage.

The higher the score, the higher the "illiberal" attitude.

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[19] A comment made by a student in a philosophy class.
[20] https://www.safs.ca/newsletters/article.php?article=1078

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