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Transcript

Robert George

There is a lot of bullying going on in the academy, in K-12 education, and in our society more generally. It's in the form of words. It's talking. But those words are things like name calling, stigmatizing, trying to intimidate people, threatening people, causing people to live in fear.

Zach Rausch

Robert George on Heterodox Out Loud. In this episode, we explore the flawed human tendency to reject and even censor opposing arguments, especially when they contradict values and beliefs that are held with conviction. Today's episode is about how we can remain confident and passionate in our commitments while also embracing and engaging opposing perspectives. I'm Zach Rausch. Let's dive in. Our guest today is Robert George, renowned legal scholar and political philosopher at Princeton University. He's the author of numerous acclaimed books and academic papers. Robert has also served as the chairman of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, the President's Council on Bioethics, and was a presidential appointee on the United States Commission on Civil Rights. In our interview, we discussed the growing hostility seen among professors and students in many institutions, how bullying has been encouraged and even praised, and how we can restore civil discourse in our classrooms and campuses. Before we chat, let's listen to Robert's blog post that he wrote in July of 2021. It's called "On Critics and Bullies," read by Richard Davies.

The full blog post can be found on our website here: [On Critics and Bullies](#)

Zach Rausch

Richard Davies reading Robert George's blog post: "On Critics and Bullies." Now, the interview.

Robert, thank you so much for coming onto Heterodox Out Loud. It's really an honor to get to talk to you.

Robert George

Oh, the honor is mine. Thank you, Zach, for inviting me on.

Zach Rausch

So before we dive into some of your writing, can you give us a little bit of a history of who you are and what's your academic story?

Robert George

Well, I'm McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University, but I'm a hillbilly banjo player from West Virginia. I was born and brought up in the heart of Appalachia in the Hills of West Virginia. I do play the Banjo. I had a rather idyllic, Finn-like boyhood growing up, hunting and fishing and playing bluegrass music with my four brothers. And then I went off to college when I was 18 and went to Swarthmore College outside of Philadelphia, a wonderful small Liberal Arts College. And I intended, as my parents intended, for me to get a good degree so that I could get a good job, wouldn't have to work in the coal mines or in construction like some of the kids I grew up with ended up doing, rise in the world, be a professional. I thought the point of education, the point of knowledge, was to, in some sense, get ahead. But then, in my sophomore year, I encountered this aggressive ancient Greek named Socrates. I encountered him because one of my professors, in an ordinary Introduction to Political Theory course, assigned Plato's dialogue "Gorgias."

And of course, that dialogue makes us ask ourselves the question, why do we engage in discussion, in debate? Why do we talk with each other? Why do we challenge each other? Is it for victory? Is it to show off? Is it to win a victory for our tribe or our clan or our group? What's the point of it? And of course, having a purely instrumental view of these matters, I assumed that the point of it was to get ahead somehow. But of course, what the dialogue brings the reader 'round to is an understanding that I had never had before. And that is that the point of dialogue, discussion, debate is to get at the truth of things, that it's the truth that ultimately matters. And the truth is not merely instrumentally valuable, not merely valuable as a means to other ends. It's most fundamentally and importantly valuable for its own sake, worth having for its intrinsic enrichment of us as rational creatures, as thinking beings. And that turned my entire life around. So everything really traces back to my encounter with that ancient Greek who took me by the lapels and shook me and awakened me from my dogmatic swampers.

Zach Rausch

So I think that your blog post is a great extension of this. So you wrote a piece called "On Critics and Bullies" a couple of years ago. Can you talk just a little bit about why you chose to write that piece and what you are trying to get across?

Robert George

There is a lot of bullying going on in the academy, in K-12 education, and in our society more generally. It's in the form of words. It's talking. But those words are things like name calling, stigmatizing, trying to intimidate people, threatening people, causing people to live in fear of losing further educational opportunities or professional opportunities, opportunities for advancement. And that's an abuse of words, an abuse of language and abuse of discussion. In fact, it's not discussion at all. It is bullying. And bullying is the opposite of discussion. There's also a lot of indoctrination going on in education, including in higher education. So my blog post was really an attempt to call that out and to distinguish that use of language, "bullying," from genuinely truth seeking, from dialogue, from authentic discussion where no one is threatening anybody, no one is trying to stigmatize anybody. The conversation partners are together, despite whatever disagreements they may have, trying to get at the truth of things. Good conversation partners are not talking for victory. They're not talking to show off. They're not tribalists who are trying to win for their clan or group. They're after the truth. The principle way we model that in academia is by how we engage with each other.

When we don't bully each other, we don't threaten, we don't intimidate, we don't stigmatize. But rather, despite whatever differences we may have, which may be profound, we are united in our desire to get at the truth of things and our willingness to change our minds under the pressure of reason, of argument, of evidence, which is the real evidence itself, that we're in the truth seeking business. We're in truth seeking mode and not abusing language by arguing for victory or trying to threaten or bully or intimidate other people.

Zach Rausch

How exactly do you do this in your classrooms and with other people?

Robert George

Well, first, it's really a matter of recognizing that however passionately one holds one's beliefs, however deeply cherished they are, however identity forming they may be, we are frail, fallen, fallible human beings. We can make mistakes, and we need to recognize, I need to recognize, all of us need to recognize that we can make mistakes not only about minor, superficial, trivial matters. We can make mistakes about deep, important, morally significant matters. And all the evidence you need for that is to look at history and see how many truly great people have made profound mistakes about questions of human dignity and human rights and justice. We think we are somehow superior. We're made of different stuff. We won't make such mistakes. We're infallible, at least when it comes to the important matters. No, we're not. We're absolutely not. And the big problem today is too many people suppose they are infallible, at least when it comes to the big questions, people will give you the answer, yes, I recognize my fallibility. But then when you touch on an issue that really matters to them, where their beliefs are deeply held, cherished, identity forming, beliefs that are central to their sense of membership in a tribe or group, well then suddenly they behave as if they talk as if, they argue as if, they are infallible; they seek victory, they use unworthy tactics: threatening, bullying, stigmatizing.

And that's what we have to avoid. So the most fundamental thing is to recognize one's own fallibility and interact with your interlocutors in truth seeking discourse founded upon the recognition that however much I may cherish my views, however passionately I may feel about them, I might be wrong.

Zach Rausch

I think it's really interesting because, this is more just my own take, there seems to be a belief that two things can't hold together, which is that you can be extremely passionate about a belief, but you can also believe that potentially you're wrong and be open to other perspectives.

Robert George

That is exactly right. I do a lot of work with Cornell West, who's on a different place on the political spectrum than I am. But we agree 100% on the issues that you and I are talking about today the importance of truth seeking discourse, the importance of avoiding bullying and intimidation and stigmatizing and name calling, the importance of recognizing one's own fallibility. And as Cornell and I go around the country talking with each other and preaching this gospel that we share, probably the most common question we get, and it comes from students across the political spectrum is but how can I be a person of conviction and action? If I doubt my views, if I doubt myself, if I'm and they

inevitably use this word, although Cornell and I rarely use it but it's how they characterize our gospel, if I'm open minded, how can I be open minded and be a person of conviction? How is that possible? And our answer is simply to point at each other. So I'll point at Cornell and say, there just do what he does. There is clearly a person of conviction. Cornell is very active politically. He participates in demonstrations, gets himself thrown into jail, stands up for the causes he believes in.

But he's no bully. Quite the opposite. He's a truth seeker. He's open minded in the sense that the students, I think, mean it. He recognizes his own fallibility, and he points to me and says he's like that, too. He's a person of convictions. He makes arguments for views that he holds quite passionately. And yet he is open to argument, open to being shown by reason and evidence and argument that he's wrong. What Cornell and I insist on, the basic core of our gospel, is that we should all be open to truth seeking conversation with each other. We should all be open to anyone who's willing to do business in the proper currency of intellectual discourse. And that's a currency consisting of reasons, arguments, and evidence.

Zach Rausch

One thing that stood out to me in your blog post and how you started was that there is quite a lot of bullying going on in universities and in other areas of life. And you end the piece by saying that we should defy bullies and call them out. How do we engage with those who do not want to engage constructively with us?

Robert George

Well, it means refusing to censor yourself. One thing we now know with as close to certainty as human beings can have, is that students all over this country, and not just students, faculty members as well, are censoring themselves. They're not saying what they believe for fear of the bullies. The real worry is what John Stuart Mill, the great theorist of free speech, called the tyranny of public opinion. Students are afraid that the bullies will stigmatize them, call them names, smear them as racists or bigots or haters if they question the dominant orthodoxy on campus. That they'll be smeared and stigmatized on social media, for example, that they will lose future educational opportunities, the opportunity to go to the prestigious law school they want to attend or to the other graduate school, that they will be marked and not be able to get a job at a Corporation where they want to work someday or something, something like that. And my message, and I'm joined by Cornell in this as well, our message is, "Don't be afraid." Don't be afraid to speak your mind. Don't allow yourself to be intimidated. Don't allow yourself to be bullied. Defy the bullies.

Speak out. Speak your mind. People will in the end respect you for that, and you will find, just as I suspect, your parents told you when you were a little boy, my parents told me that bullies are, in the end, cowards, and they thrive on other people's terror, their fear of them. But when you stand up to them, they fold.

Zach Rausch

A lot of that is from the level of the individual, maybe somewhat different level. How do we work to shift our universities in particular, away from being more of a culture of bullying towards one that really values constructive disagreement and being more of a critic?

Robert George

Well, Zach, you perhaps won't be surprised that I have some ideas about that. The first thing I think we need to do is secure the legal situation, that is, to put the formal rules into place on our campuses that will protect free speech and at least provide some kind of bulwark against the bullying. I recommend that you follow the lead of the University of Chicago and my own University, Princeton University, which was the second university to adopt the University of Chicago free speech principles. Now those principles are necessary, but they're not sufficient. And here let's go back to John Stuart Mill. Having legal protection for free, robust discourse in place is one thing, and it's a very important thing, and it's, as I say, a necessary thing, but it's not sufficient. In addition to those legal norms protecting free speech, we need to build a culture of free speech. And I think here the first responsibility falls on faculty. If we expect our students to be truth seekers and to be bold truth seekers and people who do stand up to the bullies, we had better model that for them. It's our responsibility first. Now I don't want to let them off the hook.

We need students who are role models for their fellow students. But we faculty members can't ask that of our students if we don't model it, exemplify it, ourselves. So that's the second thing, third thing goes back in the direction of the formal. I would like to see at least the non sectarian universities, the Princeton's and the Harvards and the Ohio States and the other state universities, those that are not associated with a particular faith tradition that has its doctrine, I would like to see them endorse the principles of the Calvin Report, the report from some decades ago now at the University of Chicago, which put into place principles of institutional neutrality. Universities, at least non sectarian universities, in my opinion, private or public, should not be putting a thumb on the scales when it comes to debates among reasonable people of goodwill on the campus, on moral and

political questions. Now sometimes the university has to take a stand. There are some issues that are directly related to the life of the university. There's no way around it. We get that. But beyond those that limited range, I think universities should adopt the Calvin Report principles and maintain institutional neutrality.

Let faculty and students on campus debate these important questions of public policy, human rights, justice, morality, or any other set of questions. Let them debate them without the university taking an official position and thereby putting a thumb on the scales. Next, I think we've got to reform orientation programs all over this country. The indoctrination begins with freshman orientation. In some places, it is just like being in catechism class, and that's just improper. Freshman orientation should not be used to indoctrinate students any more than the classroom should be used to indoctrinate students. Indoctrination is the antithesis of education. So there are some initial ideas. Of course, there's a lot more that needs to be done and can be done and I hope will be done. But those are some basics.

Zach Rausch

How do you distinguish between indoctrination and the model that you're proposing?

Robert George

Straightforwardly on just about any interesting question, in the humanities, social sciences, and philosophy and ethics, there are reasonable people of goodwill who disagree on the question. Every single faculty member, every single one, without exception, should be making sure that he or she presents his or her students with the very best arguments available, the best readings by the best authors and thinkers on all sides of these questions. I can tell whether indoctrination is going on ordinarily just by looking at a syllabus. I don't need to meet the professor. I don't need to sit in the classroom. I can look at the syllabus. And if the syllabus is utterly one-sided, or if one point of view is presented or represented by strong readings and the other by straw man, then I know this is not education. This course is catechism class, or worse, it really is just indoctrination. So let's do this right, all professors. Let's make sure, no matter how strongly we may feel on an issue. But where you've got reasonable people disagreeing about questions, make sure your students know what the best minds are saying on the questions, and then let the students decide for themselves where they stand on it.

Our job as professors is not to tell students what to think. It is to help them learn to think more deeply, more critically and for themselves.

Zach Rausch

Is there anything we didn't talk about that you'd want to make sure our listeners take away from your work, this piece, what you've been thinking about recently?

Robert George

Well, I'm going to repeat myself here. It's not enough simply to say that, "Gee, isn't it awful that bullying is going on? Isn't it awful that people aren't engaging in truth seeking discourse? Isn't it awful that people resort to smears and stigmatizing and name calling and all that in an effort to win arguments?" It's not enough to just talk about it. We need the courageous people, students and faculty who will actually defy the bullying, who will speak out, will speak their minds, will model the truth seeking discourse and dialogue and discussion and debate that we need if our campuses are to be reformed and live up to their missions which after all the whole point of having these institutions as truth seeking institutions, as places where people go not to be told what to think but to think as well as possible about deep and difficult questions.

Zach Rausch

Robert George on Heterodox Out Loud. If you enjoyed this episode, subscribe and listen to more thought-provoking takes from our blog authors. To engage deeper in these conversations, join us at our 2022 Heterodox Academy conference in Denver this June. We'll be joined by hundreds of members and friends. Get details heterodoxacademy.org. Thanks Davies content for producing this podcast and to Kara Boyer on our communications team. I'm Zach Rausch, until next time.