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# CLUBBING THE BABY SEALS: REFLECTIONS ON THE EPISTEMIC RIGHTS AND OBLIGATIONS OF STUDENTS

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"College teaching is a whole lot like clubbing baby seals." It was roughly ten years ago—when the ethics of bashing baby seals was front-page news—that I first heard a colleague use this vivid word picture to describe the Christian college classroom. While I feel this is clearly an overstatement, it does help raise the issues I want to address in this essay: What rights do students have? The rights I'm concerned about are not the political, legal, or moral rights we hear so much about in our society. The rights I will focus on are epistemological in nature. In other words, under what conditions does a student have a right to believe what she believes, e.g., when can a student's beliefs be said to have been properly formed. Since rights often imply obligations, I will also consider epistemological obligations college students have as they formulate their beliefs. And, of course, explorations into the student's epistemic rights and obligations will have implications for our understanding of the student/professor relationship.

I am certainly not going to attempt an exhaustive discussion of these issues. My goal is more modest. First, using the properties of deductive logic, I will make some general points about argumentation and belief formation. Second, I will show how this discussion illuminates what goes on in the classroom. More specifically, I will isolate several epistemological rights and obligations students possess and discuss how these rights and obligations should impact the student/professor relationship.

*Logic 101*

Consider the following three deductive arguments:

A. All Baptists are pacifists.
Billy Graham is a Baptist.
Therefore, Billy Graham is a pacifist.

B. All women are humans.
Billy Graham is a human.
Therefore, Billy Graham is a woman.

C. All Baptists are Christians.
Billy Graham is a Baptist.
Therefore, Billy Graham is a Christian.

Argument (A) is valid. This is to say that if the premises are true, the conclusion necessarily follows. The argument, however, fails; we are not obligated to accept the conclusion because the first premise is clearly false. Argument (B) also fails. One look at its conclusion is a good clue that something is wrong. The problem, however, is not with the premises; they are clearly true. This argument fails because it lacks validity; the premises do not establish this conclusion. Argument (C) succeeds. It is valid and has true premises.

We see from these examples that there are at least two ways an argument can go wrong: (1) It can lack validity and/or (2) it can lack true premises. A sound argument, one that establishes what it claims to establish, must pass at least two tests. It must have both a valid form and true premises.

*Deductive Logic and the Question of War*

To clarify the logic of argumentation, let's put these properties of deductive logic to work in an actual debate—the debate over whether it is ever morally permissible for a Christian to participate in war. Consider the following defense of just-war thinking:

1. National governments are sometimes obligated to use lethal force (e.g., wage war).



2. Christians are obligated to perform legitimate functions of national governments.

3. Therefore, Christians are sometimes obligated to use lethal force (e.g., participate in the waging of war).

Here is an argument that many just-war theorists would find sound and, hence, rationally convincing. How can the pacifist respond? How can the pacifist avoid the just-war conclusion? On the one hand, the pacifist could try to challenge the *validity* of the argument. In this instance, this approach does not seem very promising. The only recourse seems to be to *challenge the truth* of one or more of the premises. And, as a matter of fact, this is exactly what many pacifists try to do. Some (we can call them dualistic or separatistic pacifists) accept (1) but deny (2). In order to deny (2), they make a distinction between the ethic of this world and the ethic of the church and argue that the Christian is only bound by the ethic of the church. Others (we can call them political pacifists) accept (2) but deny (1). In order to deny (1) they claim that governments always can and should function without the use of lethal violence. If either of these moves is successful, the just-war conclusion can be avoided.

But what if a pacifist does not know how to critique either of these premises? What if she even finds these premises to be plausible? It would appear that if she is rational, she will abandon her pacifism and become a just-war believer. Epistemologically speaking, she has lost (or is in the process of losing) her right to affirm pacifism.

But this is too quick a judgment to make, for our logic lesson is not yet complete. There is another move that one can make to avoid the conclusion of a deductive argument: One can try to directly dismiss the conclusion of the argument by constructing a counterargument which has as its conclusion the denial of the conclusion of the original argument. For example, our hypothetical pacifist might find the following deductive argument convincing.

1. A Christian is obligated to follow the teachings and example of Jesus.

2. Jesus, by both teaching and example, ruled out the use of lethal violence (and hence, war) in all situations.

3. A Christian is never obligated to use lethal violence (e.g., participation in war is never justified).

This is a valid deductive argument which has as its conclusion the denial of the conclusion of the just-war argument. It seems to me that anyone who believes these premises is within her epistemic rights to deny the conclusion of the just-war argument *even if she does not know which of the premises of the just-war argument is false*. In other words, even if our pacifist does not know *why* the just-war argument is unsound, she still seems justified in believing *that* it has failed. The burden is on the just-war theorist to convince the pacifist that something is wrong with her argument. And short of this happening, the pacifist is not violating any epistemic standards in steadfastly maintaining her pacifist convictions.

We must, however, be clear on what we mean when we say our pacifist has a right to believe. Given the fact that she cannot show or explain where the just-war argument goes wrong, the pacifist must admit that her understanding of pacifism is far from complete. This realization entails two things. First, it should make her epistemologically humble in her affirmation of pacifism. While she still has a right to believe, she cannot claim (given the thus-far-unanswered just-war challenge) to know with certainty that the pacifist position is the correct position. After all, she must admit that the just-war argument is based on beliefs she does not know how to deny. Second, since her understanding of pacifism is incomplete, she must recognize that she has not adequately thought through her pacifism in terms of ethical and/or political theory. Therefore, in order to make sense out of her pacifism (in order for her pacifist beliefs to cohere with everything else she believes), she is required to undertake serious reflection in ethical and political theory. To grant our pacifist the epistemic right to believe does not mean she also has the epistemic right to *either* believe dogmatically and uncritically *or* to refrain from more serious reflection on the issue.

## Epistemology and the College Classroom

What are the implications of the above analysis for our understanding of a student's epistemic rights and the student/professor relationship? The implications I would like to develop can be summarized in four basic claims.

### (1) A Student's Right to Obstinacy

A student has a right to be obstinate in her beliefs. This is to say that we cannot expect a student to give up her beliefs easily or quickly in the face of an intellectual challenge—a challenge which, in fact, the student does not know how to dismiss. My point here is not psychological or sociological. I am not saying that we can explain on psychological or sociological grounds why a student would (due to her level of cognitive development and/or her experience of social pressures) resist abandoning a given belief. My point is that the student is under no epistemological obligation to automatically forfeit her beliefs. The student may be strongly committed to prior beliefs which directly deny the conclusion of the challenger's argument. Consequently, she is justified in resisting the conclusion of a challenger's argument even if she cannot show where the argument goes wrong.

This epistemic right I am granting students places both epistemological and moral obligations on the professor. Epistemologically, it is not proper for a professor to automatically assume that an obstinate student is falling short of some epistemic standards (i.e., is irrational, anti-intellectual, close-minded, or foreclosed). While this may be the case, establishing that it is the case is much more difficult than we sometimes realize or are willing to admit. Obstinacy, per se, is not necessarily an epistemological vice or shortcoming. It may very well be that the reason the student does not (or perhaps cannot) give up some belief in the face of a seemingly unanswerable challenge is because the student is drawing out proper logical inferences from what she already believes.

From a moral point of view, for a professor to ignore the student's epistemic rights and to subtly or not so subtly pressure such a student to change her beliefs is clearly an unjust form of coercion. In extreme cases, this could be equivalent to "clubbing the baby seals." Professors must recognize and respect a student's epistemic right to hold steadfast to her prior beliefs.

One of the reasons a student's epistemic rights are so easily violated is because, when it come to power, the student/

professor relationship is an asymmetrical relationship. It has become clear to me that the reason I am drawn to classroom teaching is not simply because I am an open-minded seeker after truth. I must confess that I enjoy being a teacher because in the classroom, I am—epistemologically speaking—very much in charge. I dictate which arguments will be presented and in what form. I am rarely forced to try to refute a formidable opponent on my opponent's terms. I am rarely forced to (1) publicly face arguments I can't refute, (2) respond to these arguments and, on top of all this, (3) have my response graded. In fact, the "difficult and challenging arguments and issues" I present in the classroom are issues I have personally dealt with already. In brief, I, as a professor, have epistemic privileges and luxuries which students, as students, do not equally share. Given the asymmetry of the student/professor relationship, it is not surprising, then, that teaching can sometimes become (or at least be perceived as) a form of clubbing.

### (2) *The Student's Obligation to Think*

Our analysis of the epistemological realities of the college classroom cannot stop here. While I have claimed a student has the right to hold on to her beliefs in the face of an intellectual challenge, this right does not relieve the student of all other epistemic responsibilities. We must avoid allowing students to have not only a false sense of epistemic certainty but also the feeling that it is epistemologically sufficient to simply demonstrate *that* some position they encounter in class is wrong without grappling with *why* it is wrong.

Let's suppose I give an ethics class an assignment which requires students to react to an article presenting the just-war theorist's argument (discussed earlier). If the student's paper is no more than a biblically based counterargument directed at the just-war conclusion, and makes no attempt to grapple with the just-war theorist's premises, the paper is inadequate. The issue here is not whether the student has a right to believe in pacifism or has a right to use Scripture to support her beliefs. Such a paper might contain a proper epistemic move which explains why the student cannot accept the just-war conclusion. But this is still not an acceptable paper for a philosophy class. The just-war theorist's argument involves





premises which are grounded in theories from political and moral philosophy. While the student is justified in believing one or both of the just-war premises is wrong, unless she grapples with these theories as philosophical theories, she is not "doing philosophy."

To reject the conclusion of someone's argument simply because it violates one's prior beliefs is a legitimate beginning but cannot be the end of the epistemological story. If our goal is to *understand* what we believe and not simply to *affirm* what we believe, then our pacifist student cannot sit back and bask in the truth of pacifism. This student is obligated to leave the sphere of her prior beliefs and, with true epistemological humility, begin thinking within the belief claims of the challenger.

A college student has (or had[1]) the choice of not being a student, but to be a student is to think within the truth claims of various intellectual traditions. There is simply no other option. When students resist doing this, I am obligated, within limits, to "get out the club." At the very least, I ask such students what they are doing at a liberal arts college. The fact that this question can be raised makes it clear that a number of students and parents are not aware of the epistemological implications of "going off to college."

### (3) *The Impact of Prior Beliefs (Faith) on Reflection*

Thus far, I have argued two things. First, it is proper for students to bring prior beliefs to bear on arguments they are evaluating and to use these beliefs to resist intellectual challenges. In a word, students have a right to remain committed to what they believe even in the face of intellectual challenges. Second, students are obligated, however, to reflect on beliefs which—if true—rule out their prior beliefs. Students are not living up to their epistemic responsibilities if *all* they do is dogmatically dismiss challenging arguments by appealing to prior beliefs.

Living up to these epistemic obligations can be a very fruitful and exciting enterprise for the student. All scholars have a right to bring their prior beliefs to bear as they think within their disciplines. To return to our earlier example, the committed pacifist who seeks to understand her beliefs in terms of ethical and political theory will be highly motivated

to show where the just-war theorist has gone wrong in his ethical and political thinking and may be the one who discovers (develops and defends) political and ethical theories which are compatible with pacifism. Strongly held prior beliefs (in a word, biases) are often useful tools for scholars as they reflect within their disciplines. And the end result of such reflection might be a richer and fuller understanding of prior beliefs.

### (4) *The Impact of Reflection on Prior Beliefs (Faith)*

It would be misleading, however, to stop here. When the student fulfills her epistemic obligation and seriously and humbly explores the arguments of the challenger on the challenger's own terms, the result is not always as optimistic as just described. To try to *understand* what one believes is risky business. To sincerely and honestly reflect within the assumptions of the challenger might not result in a deeper understanding of one's prior beliefs but, rather, in a rejection or revision of these beliefs. While it is true that prior beliefs (faith) can impact and shape understanding, it is true that seeking understanding can impact prior beliefs (faith). Intellectual reflection is an open-ended enterprise; what the final result will be can never be fully predicted. Fulfilling our epistemological obligations takes courage.

Whether a change in one's prior beliefs is viewed favorably or unfavorably will to a large extent be in the eyes of the beholder. Students who find themselves losing some of their prior beliefs might feel like baby seals and see the professors who raise the questions and force the students to live up to their epistemic obligations as club bearers. These feelings are as understandable as they are unavoidable in an academic setting.

But one person's loss is often another person's gain. Other students experience the pain associated with conceptual change not as the result of an unjustified clubbing, but more as the pain that usually accompanies exercise and meaningful growth. Here, the professor is seen as a demanding but fair coach—one who understands and respects where the student is in her belief-forming pilgrimage and will help her along the path to greater understanding.





### *Conclusion*

Professors will always be (or be perceived to be) "club bearers" to some degree. The key is to learn to bear the club responsibly. On the one hand, a professor must not club the students into epistemic submission; this violates their epistemic rights. Yet, students as students have certain epistemic responsibilities, and the professor as professor is obligated to make sure that his or her students live up to these epistemic responsibilities. Toward this end, I have spelled out four specific epistemic rights and obligations which, once recognized, will help professors become sensitive and effective epistemic guides.

### *Notes*

[1] I say "had" because it is debatable that once a student encounters and feels real challenges to her prior belief that things can ever be epistemologically the same. In a sense, she has lost her epistemic innocence.