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At the Cost of Momentum: The Case for Truth-Grounded Activism

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ABSTRACT
In the face of injustice, there is often a strong desire to mobilize others to immediate action. However, building public support is difficult when the issue is complicated. This leaves many activists tempted to present matters in simple, undifferentiated terms, as nuance can dampen momentum. However, oversimplification tends to be at odds with truth and it is this tension, between truth and activism, that is the focus of this paper. We begin by exploring the kind of communication that best mobilizes masses of people and note the inverse relationship between motivational as opposed to truthful communication. We then note that, though propaganda is more efficient in creating momentum, it nonetheless carries inherent dangers in that it may (i) over focus on symptoms rather than the disease; (ii) fuel authoritarian personality-types; and (iii) undermine the lifeblood of democracy. We conclude by suggesting that Philosophy for Children is a welcome educational response to this problem because it focuses on relevant contemporary issues, while fostering thinking skills that has the potential to lead to long lasting change grounded in truth. Ultimately the message is that a society and its citizens will do better by embracing pedagogical interventions aimed at fostering "active thinkers" rather than "activists."

KEYWORDS
Activism; truth; philosophy for children; democracy; dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

In the face of injustice, discrimination, and oppression, there is often a strong desire to mobilize others to immediate collective action. However, building up public support and energy is no easy task. This mission becomes comparatively harder when the issue is complicated and layered, as indeed many are. This leaves many activists tempted to present matters in simple and undifferentiated terms, as nuance appears to be the enemy of momentum (Alinsky, 1971, p. 133). This, we suggest, is a problem, since oversimplification is most often at odds with truth, and such efforts to garner unconditional support often require glossing over important facts and considerations. The resulting tension, between truth and activism, is the focus of this paper.

It will be argued that, while such activist simplification which is necessary for "crowd communication" may seem a worthwhile cost to pay for the resulting political momentum, it is ultimately a long-term disservice to those swept up in such movements, as well as, ironically, a potential impediment to alleviating the very social imperfection on which the activism is focused, to say nothing of its potentially devastating impact on democracy itself, the health of which depends on the ability of its citizens dialogue across difference in a cooperative effort to achieve the best possible or "truthiest" understanding of the myriad of challenges that we all face. Considering these concerns, this paper suggests that we ought to focus on substituting a revolutionary instinct for a reformatory one, and embrace pedagogical interventions aimed at fostering active thinkers instead of activists. The core of the argument will rest on the claim that the best friend to social progress is an unwavering loyalty to truth.

Crowd Communication

The social psychology text, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, first written in 1894 by Gustav Le Bon, argues that, in a crowd, "a man descends several rungs on the ladder of civilization. Isolated, he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian — that is, a creature acting on instinct" (p. 7). Thus, given that crowds of people seem to be "guided almost exclusively by unconscious motives," (p. 11) and hence, as a group, develop the characteristics of "impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments," (p. 10), it follows that communicating with a crowd must be vastly different from communicating with isolated individuals. To successfully communicate with crowds, one must be prepared, according to Le Bon, "to exaggerate, to affirm, to resort to repetition, and never attempt to prove anything by reasoning" (p. 23), and one must avoid nuance both in argument (since crowds "accept and reject ideas as a whole" (p. 38)) and in sentiment (as "sympathy quickly becomes adoration; antipathy-hatred" (p. 38)). Simplistic black-and-white messages that appeal to the mammalian brain are the essence of effective crowd communication.

In his book *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951), Eric Hoffer argues that any mass movement demands blind faith and single-hearted allegiance and, for that reason, they require messaging that breeds fanaticism, enthusiasm, fervent hope, hatred, and intolerance (p. xi); that the technique of such communication is to infect people

with a malady and then offer the movement as a cure, and that this technique inevitably cultivates the idea of sin, as well as the idea that salvation can only be found by losing oneself in the holy oneness of the "congregation" (p. 54).

Hoffer goes on to argue that these mass movements create fanatics who loathe the present as an aberration and deformity, and so despise liberals who see the present as the legitimate offspring of the past and as constantly growing and developing toward an improved future (p. 74). Reform, to the fanatic, is anathema: all that already exists is rubbish. There is no sense in reforming rubbish (p. 143). This attitude in turn, often paralyzes the liberal who is dumbfounded by the enormous joy that fanatics seem to derive from decrying the present (p. 75), and out of desecrating the country of which they are a part.

What is perhaps most pertinent about Hoffer's analysis is his reflection on the relationship, or lack thereof, between the fanatic and truth. He argues that for the fanatic, the absolute truth is already embodied in their crowd's doctrine and that, "To rely on the evidence of the senses and of reason is heresy and treason" (p. 79); that this certitude of his infallible doctrine renders the true believer impervious to the uncertainties, surprises, and the unpleasant realities of the world around him (p. 80).

Hoffer goes on to note that this absolute certainty in the rightness of his movement, and the violent intolerance of those not of like mind (p. 90) is ultimately a product of crowd communication since, "No doctrine however profound and sublime will be effective unless it is presented as the embodiment of the one and only truth" (p. 80). It is for that reason that the fanatic cannot be weaned away from his cause by an appeal to his reason or moral sense. He fears compromise and cannot be persuaded to qualify the certitude and righteousness of his holy cause (p. 85). The fanatic is also mentally self-assured, and hence barren of new beginnings. At the root of this self-assured mindset is the conviction that life and the universe conform to a simple formula—his formula (p. 156).

The Invisible Absence of Truth

Mass movements are common in our contemporary world, and while many focus on goals that are laudatory, little attention is given to the dangers of which Le Bon and Hoffer speak. The following is an example.

In 2021, news began to spread of the potential discovery of 215 bodies buried at a previous residential school in British Columbia. The news had international reach and led to renewed discussions around the legacy of residential schools in classrooms across the province and country. In one B.C. classroom, a student commented that the sisters and priests who ran the school were murderers and torturers. The teacher, in turn, commented that it may have been that "the children who died tragically while enrolled in residential schools did so mostly from disease" (McMurtry, 2023, p. 11).

The very next day, the teacher received a Letter of Suspension for having made that comment. Eight months later, and still suspended, the teacher received an investigator's report with the comment that the fact that the teacher had inferred that many of the deaths at

residential schools may have been due to disease was "inflammatory, inappropriate, insensitive, and contrary to the district's message of condolences and reconciliation" and that it was an instance of serious professional misconduct because it "left students with the impression that some or all of the deaths could be contributed to 'natural causes' and that the deaths could not be called murder" (McMurtry, 2023, p. 12).

What is of note in the comments above is that "truth" never once gets mentioned. The comments suggest that the only thing that is at issue is who has the authority to decide what should be perceived as true, and that clearly only the district has that authority.

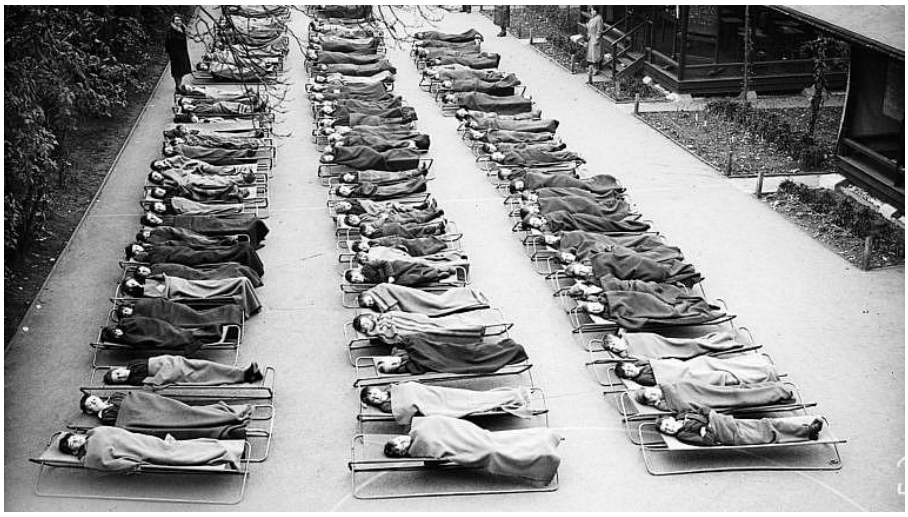
What is particularly alarming about this incident, aside from the fact that an alternative viewpoint is dismissed out of hand, is that there is a good deal of evidence that suggests that the teacher's perspective has merit. Thus, for instance, in his book *Ecological Imperialism* (1986), Alfred Crosby makes the case that the true New World conquerors were germs. He writes that the so-called miraculous triumphs of the conquistadors were really the triumphs of the smallpox virus (p. 200). And Ronald Wright writes (2004) that, "Despite their guns and horses, the Spaniards did not achieve any major conquests until *after* a smallpox pandemic had swept through. Before that, Maya, Aztecs, Incas, and Floridians all repelled the first efforts to invade them" (p. 112). And, as a "for instance," Wright describes elsewhere the triumphs of "La Noche Triste" when, in 1520, Cortés, his army of Spanish conquistadors and their native allies were driven out of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan. Of the 1200 Spaniards, approximately 900 were killed and of the 69 horses present, 46 were killed or captured. Cortés did not try to attack again until after the smallpox virus broke out (Wright, 1992, p. 43). He says:
Let nobody say that the New World went down without a fight: the battles for Mexico and Cusco were amongst the hardest fought in history. But once the epidemiological veil was torn, the people became too few to defend what their ancestors had built up for 10,000 years. "They died in heaps like bedbugs," a Spanish Friar wrote (Wright, 2004, p. 112).

None of this is, of course, to say that diseases did not also have a significant impact on citizens of the colonizing nations as well. Historical studies show that, during the same era, nearly one half of all children died before they reached the end of puberty (Roser, 2023), with the leading causes of death being tuberculosis, diarrhea, and contagious diseases, such as scarlet fever. Child mortality rates didn't start to seriously decline until the 1950s. Below is photo taken in November 1932 of children suffering from tuberculosis awaiting treatment outside a London hospital (Bethune, 2021).

Understanding that "the more we learn about pathogens, the clearer it becomes that we'll never escape them" (Bethune, 2021, p. 86), along with the understanding that all humans are vulnerable to "unfamiliar germs," suggests that, at the very least, disease should have a place in the discussion of *all* childhood deaths during that era. Yet, in spite of this, the teacher's comments, instead of being welcomed as an added perspective that might expend our understanding, were the subject of disciplinary action because they were "contrary to the district's message of condolences and reconciliation."

Figure 1.

8th November 1932: Children suffering from TB (tuberculosis) sleep outside Springfield House Open Air School, Clapham Common, London.



The fact that considerations of truth had no place in the district's narrative is part of a trend that Pluckrose and Lindsay speak of in their book *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (2020). They argue that truth, in the sense of being the end-product of objective analysis, has quietly, and in some ways invisibly, vanished. They attribute this to the fact that, the First and Second World Wars shook civilization's confidence in liberalism and Western civilization which had allowed the rise of fascism, often by the will of aggrieved electorates, with cataclysmic results (pp. 24-5). Because of this, Postmodernism triumphantly took centre stage and, in the process, booted out "a belief in objective knowledge, universal truth, science (or evidence more broadly) as method for obtaining objective knowledge, the power of reason, the ability to communicate straightforwardly via language, a universal human nature, and individualism" (p. 30). The anchoring belief of Postmodernism is Foucault's notion of power-knowledge (p. 34), i.e., that sociopolitical power is the ultimate determiner of what is true (p. 33).

And this is precisely the dynamic in this instance. The above messaging to the teacher by the representative of the school district is a demonstration of "power-knowledge" in spades. Clearly a school district has more power than a teacher hired by the district, so equally clearly it was obvious to the district's administration that if the district stands by the claim that these children were murdered, then that is therefore true.

This leaves us with a giant conundrum because:

(1) Though our society sends out the implicit message that truth is a product of objective reasoning, e.g., citizens are encouraged to fly on planes built by truth-seeking engineers and people testifying in court are asked to "tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," the same society simultaneously tries to mark off an arena of social discourse in which

what counts as true is a function of power. The difficulty is that there are no obvious visible boundaries to warn "thinkers" which arena they are operating in.

(2) This leaves individuals utterly vulnerable to what Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) refer to as "witch-hunts" (p. 113). That is, as in the case of the aforementioned teacher, individuals find themselves under attack due to believing a discourse is about objective knowledge, when in fact, the arena is entirely about "power-knowledge."

This has important implications for post-colonial movements that are often referred to as "Truth and Reconciliation." Indeed, this may be a misnomer if truth as a product of objective reasoning is no longer recognized. What may be more important in this post-colonial era is, rather, "Guilt and Reconciliation." This is so because guilting someone is a form of exerting power, so in an era of power-knowledge, forcing guilt on another is a form of having power over them, and so retaining power for oneself to decide what is, and is not, true.

The Downside of Truth's Absence

One of the crucial functions of truth is to help us accurately model the world. This, in turn, helps us avoid error and unnecessary suffering. One of the best proactive mechanisms to help establish truth is rigorous interpersonal, dialogue. This allows persons of different political persuasions, temperaments, and perspectives to engage in conversations that help cross-eliminate error by counteracting their blind spots and leveraging their valuable insights. In the absence of such rigorous truth-seeking dialogue, a society is left vulnerable to pathological ideologies and narratives, i.e., myopic, rigid misconceptions and oversimplifications of the world in which we live.

John Stuart Mill (1859) articulates the risks of adopting such one-sided narratives in his work *On Liberty.* Mill writes,

> He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side, if he does not so much as know what they are, he has no ground for preferring either opinion [...] Nor is it enough that he should hear the opinions of adversaries from his own teachers, presented as they state them, and accompanied by what they offer as refutations. He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them [...] he must know them in their most plausible and persuasive form (p. 36).

Mill's point is that even though we tend to *feel* confident in our beliefs, this confidence is not justified unless we have given the devil his due and exposed our ideas to critique. Importantly, the preference for one's initially held beliefs is not rational, as the strength of any given position can only be determined by testing it against the viewpoints of others (Gardner, 2009, pp. 23-36). This, crucially, is why truth-seeking is so important: it helps rid us of bias and misconceptions and so leads to the adoption of a more balanced and nuanced and *less erroneous* viewpoint.

Should Truth be Embraced If the Cost is Momentum?

While truth-seeking dialogue may help one avoid erroneous beliefs or arrive at a more balanced take on a given issue, it also has negative consequences with regard to motivation. The very quality of critical thinking that is prized for its ability to counteract dogma and ideology is also the root of its energy-sapping qualities: thought can forestall action because it generates uncertainty and doubt. Conversely, assurance and certainty are attitudinal states that beckon one to act.

As well, since truth-seeking dialogue may not produce a consensus, it threatens solidarity and collective action and thus may be regarded as an impediment to social justice and progressive change. It is for that very reason that crowd communicative techniques (famously used by the Nazis) are often employed by those who are most passionate about righting the wrongs of the world.

However, despite the fact that such strategies, while seemingly expedient and useful for fostering a sense of belonging and collective impact, are, we suggest, ultimately not in the best interest of "oppressed" parties, their supporters, nor the society to which they belong, and that by far the better strategy is *truth-filled activism* because it:

I. Avoids focusing on the symptoms rather than the disease.
II. Avoids the proliferation of authoritarian personalities.
III. Is the lifeblood of democracy.

We will deal with these in turn.

I. Avoids Focusing on the Symptoms Rather Than the Disease.

If a great deal of reflective thought is not utilized in trying to understand the multiple factors that gave rise to problematic issue, it is highly likely that activists will treat the symptom rather than the root of an issue. Let us take as an example, "the war on cops." Since, on the face of it, it certainly seems that Black Americans are more often stopped and, indeed, harmed by the police, many activists insist that we ought to "defund the police." However, it is not all clear that such a strategy will not do more harm than good. This, after all, is a "wicked problem" that has emerged as a result of many factors, including, most notably, economic inequality. As Heather MacDonald writes in her book *War on Cops*, defunding the police might actually make things worse as evidence suggests that such a focus makes police hesitant to enter and actively engage in minority neighborhoods and hence such neighborhoods are deprived of much needed police service (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019, p. 89). As well, as Anderson-Connolly points out (2019), though prisons hold a disproportionate number of blacks, by far the greatest disproportionality involves income (p. 53). Poor people of all colors are incarcerated at a much higher rate than anyone else. This suggests that the root problem may be poverty, not racism, and that *that* is where efforts to ameliorate the present injustice ought to focus.

II. Avoids the Proliferation of Authoritarian Personalities.

That so many citizens of one of the most sophisticated and educated countries of the world should ingest the simplistic messaging of the Nazi ideology and collude in the barbaric practices that led to the Holocaust should be shocking to all of us and was certainly so to many academics following WWII.

In response to this horror, Adorno et al. (1950) attempted to investigate what might have been the precursors. Their conclusion was that "an authoritarian personality-type" was at least partly responsible for the lemming-like behaviour of the German citizenry. They defined the authoritarian personality as a cluster of psychological traits that include deference to authorities, aggression toward outgroups, a rigid adherence to cultural conventions and a rigidly hierarchical view of the world.

Though Adorno et al. focused on the authoritarian father figure as importantly instrumental in nourishing an authoritarian personality, scholars have since emphasized other precursors, e.g., Pettigrew (2011) argues that a sense of crisis encourages authoritarianism (e.g., "somebody help me," and "the threat must be them") and Spencer, in his article "The Authoritarianism at The Heart of Influencer Culture," (2019) notes that social media has resulted in balkanization of much of humanity, "hermetically sealing its users in groupthink bubbles and delivering increasingly inflammatory content to keep them hooked" which, in turn, can cause a sense of crisis that pushes them toward the authoritarianism of which Pettigrew speaks.

As well, aside from the simplistic less-than-truthful content, the *format* of social media sites contributes to the slide towards authoritarianism (Spencer, 2019). As Spencer notes, the landscape of social media is anything but democratic. Even the way that social media sites structure themselves promotes a top-down approach to existence. Twitter and Instagram profiles, for instance, prominently list one's "followers," not one's "coevals" or "co-equals."

The subtitle of Spencer's article is: "Influencer culture is making us more narcissistic and more elite-obsessed. Is this how democracy dies?" It thus leads us to a potentially existentially important question and that is whether, right now, we are witnessing, perhaps in the very form of activism, the drumbeat of the demise of democracy.

III. Is the Lifeblood of Democracy.

Steve Bannon, the architect of Trump's 2016 victory, is quoted in an article as saying, "This is not an era of persuasion. It's an era of mobilization. People now move in tribes. Persuasion is highly overrated" (National Post Staff, 2020). To this Ronald Beiner, professor of political science at the University of Toronto, in the same article adds, "In other words, we don't even aspire to share a common world. We simply fight it out, with the most powerful prevailing over the less powerful"—thus reminiscing Thrasymachus in Plato's Republic that "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger."

That we have arrived in this Hobbesian nightmare of "might making right" may not be readily apparent because of the Foucauldian twist of seeing language as the primary landscape in which this power struggle is playing out. On the other hand, to young people who have fought

in the trenches of social media, it is a fact that war is raging, and it is that fact that they presume entitles them to pernicious anti-democratic demand to be safe from people who disagree with them (Twenge, 2017, p. 154).

In acknowledging this "war of words" (p. 176), William Davies, in his book *Nervous States: Democracy and the Decline of Reason* (2018), quotes the Russian General, Valery Gerasimov, as saying "in the twenty-first century we have seen a tendency toward blurring the lines between the states of war and peace. Wars are no longer declared" (123). Davies refers to what is now called the "Gerasimov Doctrine" to underscore the point that public argument has become a form of warfare "using ad hominem attacks on public figures to discredit and intimidate them" (124). He argues that the goal 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).

This is clearly a problem. Since democracy is a form of government that, in Dewey's words is "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 2007, p. 68), or in Nussbaum's words "a dialogical process of equal participants who come together in an honest and open attempt to articulate a common future" (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 243), this war of words, this proclivity to demonize anyone with a different viewpoint, is a disease that will kill from within. As Nussbaum points out, treating others as likely criminals will inevitably undermine any possibility of dialogical connection (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 243), this demonizing of "straight, white, cisgendered men" regardless of personal hardships (Pluckrose & Lindsey, 2020, p. 254), the defining of privilege as utterly divorced from economic status, the calling of all white people racist, all men sexist, and all straight people homophobic—all of this is fueling our worst tendencies of tribalism and vengefulness (p. 258), and utterly destroying any possibility of the kind of aisle-crossing that is fundamental to democratic way of life.

Pluckrose and Lindsay (2020) also add that it is obviously bad psychology to tell people that they are bad no matter what they do, and to set up double-binds so that, for example, if you notice race, it is because you are racist, but if they do not notice race, it is because of privilege, which is racist (p. 134). "Such attitudes tear at the fabric that holds contemporary societies together" (p. 134). Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) echo these concerns in speaking of the retributive atmosphere that has arisen on university campuses. In their words, "Life in a call-out culture requires constant vigilance, fear and self-censorship" (p. 72). As well, such expenditure of one's social energies likely has compounding costs, as it demoralizes those living in paranoia and saps them of the energy that they might otherwise direct at improving the world in which they live.

In addition, these sorts of attacks elicit pushback from the other side which fuels the carnage. Thus, Oliva Waxman (2021), in writing about how Critical Race Theory (CRT) is creating chaos in the American educational system, notes that many republican governors have signed bills that ban the use of teaching strategies that resemble CRT; that some have suggested that teachers be required to wear body cameras; and that teachers in Arizona can be fined $5,000

for making students feel guilty over their race (p. 78). Such pushback is solidifying the false dilemma of whether we should question the past or celebrate it; whether we should be members of Team 1619 (the year that the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia) or Team 1776 (the year of the American Declaration of Independence from Britain); whether teaching about race in America is a form of "child abuse" or whether failing to teach it constitutes a form of "child abuse" (p. 83). These false dilemmas have become so toxic that a school superintendent in St. Louis Missouri, who resigned after just two years on the job, is quoted as saying: "I'm concerned as a fellow citizen that some have lost the ability to truly consider the perspective of another" (Waxman, p. 84)—a capacity that is or should be "the mark of an educated citizenry."

This worry that contemporary citizens may not be up to the task of democratic maintenance is something that spurred Stephan Marche, in his book *The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future* (2022), to suggest that the US is spiraling into disaster as a function of the fact that its political and legal systems are polarized, paralyzed and rejected as illegal by millions of citizens (quoted by Bethune, 2022, p. 80). And Marche goes on to say "one way or another, the United States is coming to an end. Its divisions are too intractable, its constitutional structure too archaic, its proclivity to violence too entrenched for any other outcome" (Bethune, 2022, p. 81).

Such a defeatist attitude, however, is one that Andrew Sullivan argues (2021) ought to be resisted. He argues that, in defence of a liberal democracy, "We can and must still fight and argue for what we believe in: a liberal democracy in a liberal society. This fight will not end if we just ignore it or allow ourselves to be intimidated by it or join the tribal pile-ons."

So, on that note, and in locking arms with Sullivan, we arrive at the conclusion that, for those of us who are rooting for democracy's survival, another way must be articulated, and time is of the essence. That way, we suggest, is through the educational promotion of dignity-preserving *truth-seeking* dialogue that can nonetheless actively nudge us toward a better future.

An Education in Support of Active Thinkers Rather Than Activists

One worry that may arise for those who are activist-minded is that reasoning is actually an exercise in sophistry which will result in the entrenchment of injustice rather than amelioration. Indeed, many studies appear to indicate that reasoning is a post hoc process in which one bolsters their previously held beliefs rather than a process that fosters belief recalibration or reconsideration (Zajonc, 1980). Three researchers at Stanford, Ross, Lepper and Hubbard (1975) found that belief perseverance was remarkably robust, even in the face of evidence that such beliefs were unfounded. Likewise, another study on confirmation bias by Lord, Ross and Lepper (1979) found that students were great at poking holes in positions they disagreed with, but remarkably poor at seeing the faults in their own positions and were often instinctively dismissive of others' viewpoints. After being exposed to both arguments for and against their position, and then being re-asked to rate the confidence in their position, exposure to the views of the other side resulted in their confidence *increasing* from their baseline reports. In light of

these findings, one might contend that reasoning is, in fact, a dangerous exercise because it will enhance confidence in one's prejudices and function as an obstacle to positive social change.

Mercer and Sperber (2017) call this kind of confirmation bias the “myside” bias and suggest that even though disconfirmation seems like an adaptive trait because it serves to rid us of falsehoods, our “hyper-sociability” historically made it maladaptive. Put differently, our need to be on the same team as other members of our tribe trumps the potential upside of refining our beliefs to be “truer” (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019, p. 58). Indeed, in the bestseller *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (2009/1936), author Dale Carnegie recounts a banquet where he corrected a fellow guest who was misattributing a quote of Shakespeare's to the Bible. Carnegie was quickly kicked under the table by a friend, who assured the other man he had in fact quoted Shakespeare correctly. When Carnegie later asked his friend why he intervened and did not correct the obvious mistake, the man responded “Why prove to a man he is wrong? Is that going to make him like you?” (p. 63). Even from this short anecdote, it is clear that oftentimes likeability is considered more precious than truth.

This tendency to quickly turn disagreement into debate, with individuals hooking their identities into one side or the other, may be a function of precisely that, i.e., that we view problems in a simplistic manner that require either X or not-X. Real problems, however, are rarely black and white but, rather, are “wicked”—not in the sense of “evil,” but in Bentley & Toth’s (2020, p. 10) sense of resulting from multiple overlapping causes that require multiple overlapping energies to manage rather than solve. As Bentley and Toth put it, “Solving is for tame problems. Taming is for wicked ones” (p. 53). And they go on to say that:

Largely because of our way of viewing problems as well as our style in working with others—ignoring, labelling, or demeaning them, and especially blaming them when things fall apart—we become the enemy of constructive action and fruitful *collaboration* (emphasis added, p. 197).

And that, we suggest, is the key for educating young people so that they have the skill and instinct to see *wicked problems* for what they are, and to help them develop the skill and instinct to engage in collaboration thinking with those who hold diverse perspectives.

Developing the skill and instinct to engage in collaborative thinking is precisely the goal of immersing young people in *facilitated* Communities of Inquiry (CPI)—the pedagogical touchstone of Philosophy for Children (P4C). Communities of Inquiry differ radically from debates. The goal of a debate is to rally others to one's side with elegant or compelling rhetoric, while a CPI attempts to foster the kind of curiosity that leads to deeper, exploratory collaborative thinking, something that is necessary for mapping the implications of one's own beliefs and those of others.

Collaborative thinking that transpires in a CPI is also radically different from thinking that simply transpires in a group. Thus, Markova and McArthur, in their book *Collaborative Intelligence: Thinking with People Who Think Differently* (2015) are at pains to point out that thinking together with others may just be thinking alone together (p. 88), or worse, a pile-on of

bias. They quote Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline,* who presents data to support the claim that the IQ of a group can drop by more than 30 percent compared to the IQ of individuals in the group (p. 8)—which, on the other hand, should not seem surprising given the communicative dynamic that underpins crowd communication.

A Community of Inquiry is thus unique in that, instead of a group of people finding common ground as a community due to, say, a common trait or tribe, a Community of Inquiry coalesces through the common goal of the pursuit of truth.[1]

Scientists form Communities of Inquiry regularly by dialoguing together and by publishing in peer-reviewed journals so that their work is open to the critique of others—the fodder for forward movement. Lukianoff and Haidt (2019) point out this process works because it takes account of the confirmation biases that run deep in all of us:

This is why viewpoint diversity is so essential in any group of scholars. Each professor is—like all human beings—a flawed thinker with a strong preference for believing that his or her own ideas are right. Each scholar suffers from the confirmation bias—the tendency to search vigorously for evidence that confirms what one already believes. One of the most brilliant features of universities is that, when they are working properly, they are communities of scholars who cancel out one another's conformation biases (p. 109).

Lukianoff and Haidt refer to this process as disconfirmation. Philosophy for Children borrows this rubric as an educational model for young people. The assumption is that young people need to learn to articulate their views succinctly, and to eagerly reflect on and engage with contending alternatives. Since the goal is the pursuit of truth[2], it is critical that this dialogue adhere to the rules of logic, which Lipman notes is the methodology of inquiry (2003, p. 92), and hence guidance from a trained facilitator is crucial.

It is also crucial to note that Communities of Inquiry are characterized by non-adversarial deliberations (Lipman, 2003, p. 94) and thus, if facilitated well, will convert the classroom into a place of friendship and cooperation, rather than one of debate and competition. This is not to say, though, that participants do not challenge one another. This is only to say that such challenges are always directed at the reasons offered and never at the person offering them. It is in this sense that CPI participants are enacting what Darwell (2006) refers to as a second-personal[3] stance.

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[1] It is important to note here that, as in science, "truth" does not mean truth with a capital T in the sense that it is true in all places and all times. As Lipman notes (2003) "The attainment of settled beliefs is a progressive matter; there is no belief so settled as not to be exposed to further inquiry. . .. In scientific inquiry, the criterion of what is taken to be settled, or to be knowledge, is being *so* settled that it is available as a resource in further inquiry; not being settled in such a way as not to be subject to revision in further inquiry" (p. 93).

[2] In contrast to conversations that are carried on for their own sake (Lipman, 2003, p. 89).

[3] If you are writing a narrative, the second person stance is one that involves the reader in the narrative, e.g., you cross the bridge and suddenly you feel a cold chill emerging from the surroundings. Your heart is racing, etc.

According to Darwell, the notion of second-personal derives from the agents' relation to one another (as opposed to striving for *impersonal* objectivity) (pp. 8-9). Quoting Fichte, Darwell notes that "pure second-person address always presumes to direct an agent's will through the agent's own self-determining choice" (p. 20). In other words, goal is not to attempt to manipulate the other into believing what you do, it is rather to join together with the other as an equal partner in pursuit of truth. As Darwell points out, second-personal address is reason-giving in its nature and differs fundamentally from coercion in that it seeks to direct a person through her own free choice and in a way that recognizes her status as a free and rational agent[4]. It is an attempt to guide rather than goad (p. 49).

And, in a final boost for "democratic relationality," Philosophy for Children, when it is being true to Dewey's demand to focus educational effort on topics that are *relevant* (Dewey, 2007[5]; Lipman, 2003, p. 86), also creates a unique environment in which deeply troubling divisive issues can be examined under the tutelage of the facilitator who ensures that standards of good reasoning are maintained, that inflammatory rhetoric is quieted, and that listening to one another's reasoning takes place. It is thus in this sense that Philosophy for Children can meet the dual demands of *both* activism and truth in that it ensures that attention is directed toward issues that are contemporary and relevant, while also fostering the development of thinking skills that, if done consistently and over long periods of time, may very well lead to long and lasting change grounded in truth.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, activists of yore were privileged. The wrongs that they intended to right were stark and obvious, and so momentum seemed self-propelled. Attempting to ensure that Black people in America no longer suffered from legal segregation or attempting to ensure that at least some women in some parts of the world were allowed to vote were clear injustices that afforded the articulation of relatively clear-cut solutions.

Compared to the past, social justice issues have made much headway. However, significant problems remain, and those problems are far more complex. Segregation may no longer be legally required in the West, however, racial minorities nonetheless continue to suffer from significant injustice. And this is hugely complicated by the fact that, poor people of all colors are incarcerated at a much higher rate than anyone else, and since poor Whites outnumber poor Blacks in sheer numbers in prisons, though not proportionately (Anderson-Connolly, 2019, p. 53), it is not clear whether race or poverty, or a combination of both, should be the focus of social justice efforts. And though women, at least in the developed world now have the vote, a significant glass ceiling remains stubbornly in place. This is hugely complicated

[4] A third-person perspective doesn't treat the other as self-determining, e.g., an authoritarian parent (or activist).

[5] Dewey (2007) argues, for instance, that topics under consideration must be such that they point to the future (p. 101) and that are such that participants recognize that they have something at stake (p. 102).

by the fact that women continue to be, often by their own choice, the primary caregivers of our children, so that it is not evident if one should pressure companies and countries to have more women in top slots with the same pay as men or to fight for universal childcare or both.

The complexity alone of contemporary problems makes continued progress toward a better world challenging. To add to this confusing state, fury is often more intense than in days of yore. This is so because, as Hoffer notes (1951), "Discontent is likely highest when misery is bearable; when conditions have so improved that an ideal state seems almost within reach" (p. 28) and that "a grievance is most poignant when almost redressed." And he adds that "The intensity of discontent seems to be in inverse proportion to the distance from the object fervently desired" (p. 29), i.e., the nearer we think we get to a tolerably decent social arrangement, the more furious we become. And he notes, in passing, that there was increased prosperity before the 1789 French Revolution, and so suggests that it is not actual suffering but the taste of better things that excites people to revolt.

None of this is to say, of course, that we ought not to continuously and vigorously engage in our cooperative efforts to make society a better place. This is only to say that the "means" matter. Just as it should be obvious that it is worse than counterproductive for a father to hit his son because his son hit a classmate, so it should be obvious that engaging in demonizing verbal warfare is worse than counterproductive if the goal is to increase the efficacy of democratic responses to the ever-present ever-changing wicked challenges (Bentley & Toth, 2020) that we humans will inevitably and always face. This is only to say that the best way forward, both for individuals and the society at large, is to engage in the kind of impartial reasoned dialogical interaction that preserves the dignity of all and whose iron-clad goal is to seek and preserve truth. It is only by engaging in such dignity-preserving, truth-seeking dialogue, and by ensuring that young democratic citizens are educated so that it becomes instinctual for them to engage in dignity-preserving, truth-seeking dialogue, that democracy will be kept aloft and so maintain its forward movement of continual self-correction.

At present, democracy is faltering. The basic principle of democracy, i.e., that we use dialogue to settle our differences rather than violence and retribution, is teetering on shaky, sick legs. If we fail to address the death of dignity-preserving truth-seeking dialogue in social spaces, the outcome will be hard to imagine, though it is not inconceivable, as Brendon Sweetman (2021) suggests, that democratic systems may actually begin to unravel (p. ix).

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