

FIGHTING IMPERVIOUSNESS WITH VULNERABILITY: TEACHING IN A CLIMATE OF CONSERVATISM*

In July of 2004, I moved from Chicago, Illinois to Jonesboro, Arkansas. This essay will focus on the very particular ramifications of my transition from a racially, ethnically, religiously, politically, and otherwise diverse community of researchers, teachers, and students to a fairly homogenous, Republican, fundamentalist, Baptist, white community of researchers, teachers, and students. However, I believe the concerns expressed here are legitimately extended to the climate and character of discourse (political and otherwise) throughout the United States, both within and outside of educational settings. The challenge I am exploring here is that of teaching critical theory¹ (and to some extent being a critical thinker) in a particular type of “conservative climate.”

Introduction: A Case Study

During my short tenure at a medium size, number two state university in the Arkansas Delta, I have contended with students, faculty, staff, and administrators who address me as “Miss Jeanine” while calling my male partner “Dr. Schroer.” Several students have been provoked by class discussions into “testifying” to me about the good grace of “our Lord”; many more have inquired as to where I go to church (without the thought or concern that I might go to a temple, a mosque, or nowhere at all). I have directed an independent study on Christian Bioethics, and I have guided the development of a paper arguing that the secular tone of liberal rhetoric has left U.S. culture in a moral vacuum.² Though I was warned about the community’s religious professionals monitoring philosophy classes for content, so far I have been complimented on the fact that “I am not like a radical feminist at all; I am, by contrast, very reasonable.” I had only

just become used to the compliment that I formerly received, that I was “not at all like a real black person.”

My first year in the profession was in some ways both surreal and terrifying. Having finally surmounted the hurdle of completing my PhD and finding a job, I discovered that the job security and intellectual freedom that I had just begun to acquire was under attack. Better, more credentialed academics were being threatened and undermined all over the country. In Colorado, a department chair was removed and his tenure was threatened as a direct response to comments he made about the events of 9/11. In Los Angeles, a young alumnus took it upon himself to pay students to report on so-called “dangerous” professors at UCLA. David Horowitz has found that there is profit to be made in maintaining a hit-list of the “100 most dangerous professors” in the U.S.³ I do not, however, have to imagine fantastically that I might have the kind of impact that would draw Horowitz’s ire. All I have to do is anger the wrong local minister, Republican, or Conservative administrator in my own tiny universe and, in these hard times of far more philosophers than philosophy jobs, less and less funding for higher education, and decreasing valuation of humanities, I could find myself in a bad way. The list of incidents seems to grow daily, and I am reminded of some advice I received about hiking in areas occupied by mountain lions: Don’t make eye contact; try to look big.

To illuminate fully the challenges our current climate poses in the classroom, I want to consider a case. Early in every semester in my introductory classes, before the students are introduced to the methods of argumentation, I ask them to write a short essay arguing for an opinion. Though I urge them to write on something close to their experience—whether Xbox or

Sony PlayStation is the superior game system, for example—a few students always choose to tackle “big topics.” In our current climate, one could easily imagine the following scenario:

I receive a paper whose thesis is that homosexuals should not be allowed to marry because they are morally repugnant. When I read this paper, I will be disconcerted, worrying both that when this student is called upon to read her essay in class, her classmates will have an adverse reaction to her because of this essay, and that they will not have this reaction. The essay is made worse by poor grammar, poor argumentation, and factual errors that are typical of students new to philosophy and to tackling morally charged, complex issues.

My response to this thesis, which I will find indefensible, will be visceral. I will spend more time on this essay than I spend on any of the other essays, even double-checking to make certain that my critique speaks only to the form of the essay rather than to its content. I will do this both because I wish to encourage and not silence a young woman who may aspire to be a philosopher, and because I want to leave no fodder for complaint that I have unduly punished a student because of her religious or political commitments (neither of which are relevant to her evaluation in my class).

Unfortunately, the student will not recognize my efforts to be fair. Instead, she will seek out readily available information about me from the internet. When she discovers that I am a feminist, this will explain why, in her estimation, I graded her so unfairly. In her view, I am a godless, family-hating feminist with no moral core and an axe to grind. She will share this analysis with many students, whether or not they ask about me, as well as with her parents, her boss, and her minister.

A variety of academic nightmares, varying from the merely off-putting to the truly alarming, will follow. The student will petition the university bureaucracy for a grade change on the grounds that I have treated her unfairly. My chairperson, dean, and I will have to meet with a community leader to discuss the dangerous liberal bias that is running rampant in the academy. While the university proclaims its support for its faculty, I will be secretly encouraged to change the grade. After I carefully articulate why my grading is fair and why this particular style of management of faculty assessment strategies is dangerous, I will be allowed to go about my business. Later, however, I will discover that a high-ranking administrator has decided that my radical unwillingness to “take one for the team” makes me a danger to the university. I will be unable to set aside my worry that he will quietly pass the next few years building a case against my being awarded tenure.

Two elements of this case are of particular interest to me. First, I want to characterize an important element of this circumstance—teaching critical theory in the particular conservative climate of the United States right now—that captures not only the student’s interpretation and response to the events, but also the impact her interpretation has on the larger community.

Second, I am interested in the overall impact this phenomenon has on a small segment of the relevant community, specifically, on academics who are minorities, women, homosexuals or members of other disenfranchised groups, as well as on those who teach critical theory or radical views. Ultimately, these considerations will bring me to what is for me a very familiar concern: vulnerability. Specifically, I will argue that part of the challenge of teaching in our current conservative climate is managing a clash of vulnerabilities. Before discussing these issues, I need to clarify what I mean by “conservative climate.”

Conservatism Corrupted

The climate in question stems from the corruption of conservative tenets that are common to social and religious conservatism and prominent in the “family values” ideology of the Religious Right. Conservatism consists of both ideological and non-ideological strains. Non-ideological conservatism is an opposition to rapid change in governmental and societal institutions; this plausible conservatism calls for non-revolutionary social change and for a certain reverence for societal traditions. I call it “non-ideological” because it offers no specific account of which traditions should be revered. Social conservatism and its specific forms—like religious conservatism, for example—revere specific traditions. The religious conservatism that is prominent in and around the institution where I teach simply cashes out “societal traditions” in particularly religious terms. This view, thus, requires that our society be observant of both the significant role that religion—particularly Christianity—has played in the development of our moral and political values and of its continuing role in many U.S. citizens’ everyday lives. It asks that we also take care not to reject radically those values or attempt to abstract them from religion to such a degree that they become meaningless.

Though I remain unconvinced by arguments for these conservative principles, I find that they could be defended. I can imagine a defense of the non-ideological forms of conservatism, especially the reverence for tradition. The extensive history of any particular societal or religious tradition does not provide incontrovertible evidence of its truth or value. However, it may be injudicious to supplant old beliefs in processes that allow time for neither careful exploration of the similarities between new beliefs and old beliefs, nor comparative analyses of them. Our justified concerns about the religious commitment to “honor thy father” might go unanswered in an ideological revolution that rejected religion but embraced a secular principle maintaining a rigid public/private distinction. A public/private distinction might give a father a dangerous amount of unchallenged authority over his children in much the same way that an unexamined insistence upon honoring him would. A reverence for tradition would force ideological transitions to take place at a pace that would allow the opportunity to make such observations. Furthermore, I can even imagine a defense of certain forms of social and religious conservatism. I am especially moved by the concern that we sometimes abstract what are really religious values from those origins without taking care to determine whether they maintain any meaning and value outside that context. Non-ideological conservatism and religious conservatism are defensible positions. When confronted with these conservative principles, though I disagree with them, I am nonetheless obliged to engage seriously with the concerns they express.

I worry, however, that a certain corruption of conservative principles is increasingly common. I worry that there is a self-serving misinterpretation of what these principles justify and what they allow. In this misinterpretation, reverence for tradition—or, as in the case of the more ideological conservative formulations, reverence for religious principles and doctrine—is

understood as *deference* to them. It is not simply that the student from the case disagrees with my politics or with what she perceives as my assessment of her religion; she further believes that her point of view is so sacred that any perspective that can be construed as critical of it is justly silenced.⁴ She believes she has the right not to have oppositional views imposed upon her own. This phenomenon extends beyond the recurring attempts to silence dissenting voices by public scorn, threatened attacks, and actual attacks on material and personal well-being. Certain aspects of the development, maintenance, and marketing of a sort of private Christian culture—complete with Christian schools, special Christian textbooks, Christian music, Christian movies, Christian fiction, and Christian television—seem justly construed as attempts to insulate further certain value structures from outside criticism.

Call the right claimed by the student “ideological imperviousness” or “ideological invulnerability.” This is the right to have one’s ideology or worldview totally unaffected by and indifferent to criticism. Indirectly, it is a right to leave one’s own views generally unconsidered. It is, ultimately, a will to a certain kind of ignorance. And it is not just religious views that are employing this invulnerability: certain foreign policies, economic perspectives, and political positions—even the purported views of person *X*, where *X* is any one of a number of conservative pundits and politicians—seem to be demanding a free pass.⁵ This ideological imperviousness is the important element of our “conservative climate” with which I am centrally concerned.

I do not take this general phenomenon to be new. It is part of what Iris Young called “cultural imperialism.” In this case, ideological imperviousness is part of the process that establishes a particular belief system as the norm against which other views are measured.⁶ This

is not an overt element of oppression; it is more accurately described, in Peggy McIntosh's terms, as a "privilege."⁷ In this case, the privilege allows one to remain oblivious to the language and customs of others without feeling any penalty or experiencing such obliviousness with regard to one's own culture. This notion of privileges captures an important feature of ideological imperviousness and social oppression, more generally: it captures the subtlety of certain elements of oppression. Specifically, it captures the fact that oppression does not simply deny certain social and material goods to certain groups; it also provides social and material goods to certain other groups. The privileges of being a member of a dominant group are often characterized as the just rewards for something other than group membership. Other times, they remain utterly invisible; that is, beneficiaries of these privileges completely fail to notice that they have received something others have not. Closer inspection reveals that though no one group has more right to these goods than any other—i.e., everyone has the right to speak to health professionals about his or her well-being in his or her native language—some group or set of groups receives them while they are withheld from others. Ideological imperviousness is a privilege to which *no* group has a right. It is, however, a privilege which many have claimed. What strikes me as unique to our current cultural climate is the fact that with increasing frequency people seem to claim this privilege, in precisely these terms, without an ounce of irony or self-reproach. This strikes me as precisely the kind of erroneous line of thought involved in cases like the recent protest made by a student from the Georgia Institute of Technology who demands, on the grounds of religious freedom, that the university not interfere with her right to express intolerance for homosexuality on campus.⁸ She seems to believe that she has a right to create a hostile environment for other students because her religion endorses such behavior;

furthermore, she ought to be able to do *anything* she takes her religion to endorse without penalty, without risk of repercussions, and without any sort of accountability to those whom she might harm.⁹ What is more astounding is that people are indulging and, to some degree, accommodating these sorts of demands.

Agency in Practice

I now want to return to the case and the second element of it with which I was concerned. Specifically, I want to explore the broad context in which ideological imperviousness occurs and its ramifications in that context. The learning environment in a collegiate classroom is the product of the combined efforts of professors and students, as well as a host of others including administrators, staff, state boards, and taxpayers. The effectiveness of this environment is especially dependent on the actions of professors and students; these two groups must act together to create a functional learning environment. Agents take action in groups in a variety of ways.¹⁰ Sometimes the actions taken by numerous individuals are summed and thus become group action; this is, more or less, how U.S. elections work. Other times, the agency of distinct individuals is integrated at the outset of action (not just at its conclusion as it is in elections). One way this occurs is when we undertake action within a practice. A practice is an activity specified by a system of rules that defines roles and rules for that activity.¹¹ It is also a means by which agents can act together governed by rules and reasons that are not totally their own *while* maintaining the integrity of their agency. Agents commit to the engagement in a practice and *allow* the practice to dictate their actions, provide guidelines for their actions, advance other rules by which they must abide, and roles they will undertake. Our agency remains intact in practices because it is as agents that we accept the role given to us by the practice. We internalize the

practice's rules. They become the values by which we make our choices; they become *our* values. Though we may not care for one practice-rule or another, these rules are not impositions because accepting them is part of our willful acceptance of the practice.¹²

When entering into marriages, we explicitly commit to a practice with fairly well-defined rules and roles. We also enter into practices whose rules are less well-defined in circumstances that are less explicit—teaching in a collegiate classroom is such a practice. Ideally, professors choose texts and develop assignments which they use to help students learn material and to assess student success. Students complete assignments and accumulate knowledge in particular subjects. Though it is better defined than many of the practices in which we engage—take the practice of being a daughter, for example, which admits of different rules and responsibilities depending on class, race, ethnicity, and age—the teaching/learning practice in a college classroom, nonetheless, leaves certain procedural questions unanswered. The formality of interaction between student and professor, the maturity level of the language and sub-topics, and what topics are off limits, are dynamic elements of this practice that might vary depending on the university one attends, the professor one chooses, and the specific class one is taking from that professor. To some degree, these elements of the collegiate learning practice are worked out in the course of actual engagement in the practice. Boundaries are set, tested, expanded, and retracted by students and professors acting together. It is this type of circumstance that is at work in the case above: a professor and student hash out which, if any, topics are taboo and how they should be treated when they are presented in the classroom. Because of the social positioning of the student—in our case, she is young and committed to a religious community upon whose

authority she depends and to whose authority she defers—the negotiation extends outside the classroom to include parents and religious leaders.

Engaging in a practice allows individuals to follow rules and defer to authority without losing their agency in the process. Ideally, a practice will include rules that allow the practice participants to reshape the practice to better serve their joint ends. These rules will include procedures that take into account the equal agency of all the practice's participants. Though the participants might not have equal knowledge or equal power, they incur equal authority in virtue of their standing as *agents*. They are equally entitled to attempt to ensure that the practice aims at a goal they can share and to leave the practice if it does not. Practices do not—and should not—grant unilateral authority over their rules and roles to one individual. If one person were to have this authority, they would have it at the expense of the practice's other participants. In the case above, the agents all employ procedures put in place to ensure that all relevant parties have an equal standing in the decision-making process—the student uses university grievance procedures, the community leader employs something of a town meeting-type strategy, and the administrator uses the tenure process. Ideological imperviousness, however, makes an end run around the strategies put into place to grant equal standing to all interested parties. To the degree that any individual relies upon ideological imperviousness, an undue and unjust burden is placed upon the other participants in the practice. Much of our security in a practice is dependent upon being able to engage in cooperative reform of the practice as needed. Ideological imperviousness may undermine both the ability of other participants to reform the practice so that it remains something to which they can commit themselves and their ability to identify it as something to which they can no longer commit.

To see this more clearly, let us return to our case. Assume for the sake of argument that we all agree on the validity of the various processes that are necessary to put a particular academic into a particular classroom—graduate apprenticeship, PhD granting, institutional hiring procedures, evaluation procedures, and promotion procedures. I enter into the practice aimed at determining what kinds of beliefs can and cannot be challenged in college classroom with the reasonable but defeasible position that anyone wishing to claim that homosexuals should not be allowed to marry in part of an assignment for my class must defend that claim with reasons and facts that are clearly and directly relevant to their conclusion. (This position is defeasible because it could ultimately be ruled out by the decision to exclude discussions of homosexuality from this particular class.) I also operate on the assumption that any feminism-based commitments I might have to tolerating a variety of sexualities—including homosexuality—are not, *by themselves*, evidence of my inability to treat folks with opposing religious commitments fairly. I am prepared to defend my position by arguing that the inherent purpose of a philosophy class involves developing a certain type of argumentative ability and by referring to my history of supporting folks with whom I disagree.

The student, community leader, and administrator enter the practice with their community-shared ideological imperviousness. Specifically, they share the view that their belief that their religion rejects homosexuality—and beliefs close related to that belief—must not be criticized in any way, neither directly nor indirectly. (My analysis of the student’s position does not directly attack the belief that fundamentalist Baptist Christianity rejects homosexuality. My criticism is indirect; I refuse to accept the idea that *in any context*—including a philosophical one—fundamentalist Baptist Christianity’s rejection of homosexuality is sufficient evidence against

homosexuality and homosexual practices.) The ideological imperviousness of the student, community leader, and administrator has at least two consequences. First, they will dismiss any criticisms of their protected ideology out of hand. My arguments—that certain kinds of tactics and reasons are appropriate to making arguments in a philosophy class and that all arguments are equally subject to criticism about whether they do or do not employ these correct kinds of reasons and tactics—can have no purchase, despite my training and authority, because they come into conflict with some element of an impervious ideology. This is simply what it means to make some ideology impervious. Any stubborn insistence on some view that stops short of dismissing criticism out of hand, while annoying, is not the same sort of problem. Of course, one can create the superficial appearance of considering criticism while steadfastly maintaining an ideology as impervious. In this case, my insistence that the student did not provide reasons to justify her position is interpreted as a rejection of “undeniable fact”: the immorality of homosexuality. Thus, my position must simply be wrong.¹³ Second, because their impervious ideology is accepted and shared by a large community—meaning that it is actually on some level socially inappropriate to criticize it—my attempt to criticize it reads as an act of aggression or as otherwise irrational. I must know that my argument can have no purchase, so to insist on making it must be an attempt at insult. I could generously be read as not realizing that my argument is inappropriate, but that just seems like a different, sadder kind of irrationality. The benefits that ideological impervious gives its possessors lead directly to detriments for their opponents. I am made impotent and marked as irrational to boot. Despite the safeguards in place to certify that all participants will have equal standing in the practice, I have been disarmed. My ability to speak from my experience and training is silenced. My view is simply trumped. Ideological

imperviousness undermines the ways a practice functions to protect the integrity of the agency of its participants. This consequence of ideological impervious causes me to find it morally suspect.

Vulnerable Agents

So the challenge of teaching in a climate of conservatism brings me to what is for me a very familiar narrative: vulnerability. The vulnerability at issue here is of a very particular sort. When one commits to a practice, one commits to its procedures; one even commits to the special procedures that the practice posits for critiquing and altering it. Furthermore, one commits to a role that the practice designates; one is made over into a spouse, or a student, or a professor. Agency is preserved within practices because a practice's rules are not external impositions. Instead, a practice defines me as an assistant professor, and there are just certain things that an assistant professor should do. If I do not want to do one or another of those things, I can appeal to elements in the practice that would allow me to change it, but that change is something I must undertake with the other practice participants. Allowing some practice to designate who I should be is a serious undertaking; when I do this, I endorse and accept the rules of this practice. When the practice demands that I attend to community standards with regard to the content of my class, I take this obligation seriously. When the practice demands that I participate in hearings that challenge my professionalism and integrity, I must do so. To refuse would be to reject basic principles to which I am committed in virtue of accepting the practice. For example, I am committed to the presence of grievance procedures that protect students from the power differentials between them and professors; I am committed to them even if the grievance is against me, and even if I think the grievance is unjust. My student's ideological imperviousness

undermines the practice of collegiate education; at the very least, it undermines elements of that practice. In doing that, it undermines *me*. Because the success of the practice—this process by which I have made myself over—depends on all the participants. My agency, it turns out, is both protected by the practice yet at risk of being yanked out from under me when I subscribe to it. Suddenly, I find that I have willfully submitted to a grievance procedure in which the other participants will reject my reasons out of hand. I have, through my agency, engaged myself in a practice that robs me of my agency. Ideological imperviousness undermines the safeguards put in place to maintain the integrity of the agency of the practice's participants.

Despite being a highly privileged black woman—so highly privileged that when I teach the notion of race as a social construction, I urge my students to take seriously the possibility that based on the material markers of privilege I ought not count as black—I have learned to live with a sense of dread. I cannot help but wonder how much more likely one is to be targeted by conservatives and conservative groups if one is a woman, a person of color, disabled, or homosexual. I fear that I am in danger of losing my job and my material well-being; I fear that I will see my plans and projects (political, moral, familial and otherwise) derailed. I wonder if I should take precautions—repress whatever radicalness I possess, disguise myself subtly, as one of those “reasonable” exemplar minorities that Derrick Bell talks about¹⁴—in order to protect myself, my job, my role as a dark face, a female face in a sea of white male ones. Perhaps what is most poignant is that I feel a certain sort of madness. I make plans to dodge the obstacles created by ideological imperviousness, while believing that my plans and efforts will have little or no impact.

The point, in short, is that I spend some of my time managing a seemingly inescapable sense of vulnerability. I do not just deal with my dread; I manage it, bearing in mind broad political, moral and pedagogical obligations I also have. I do what I can to shore up my life, to ease my dread, while endeavoring also to do what I *should*. All the while, I am aware that my actions may ultimately be futile. Instead of challenging what I see as injustice, I must question the practice itself and the role it establishes for me. I must question *myself* as a collegiate educator. Though I am highly suspicious of the sincerity and intentions behind many of the recent headline garnering grabs for ideological imperviousness, I see something familiar in the subtler trades on ideological imperviousness that my students employ: I see an attempt to manage their *own* perceived and actual vulnerability.

In order fully to understand the worry, let me say a bit more about the young woman from my example. More likely than not, she is from northeast Arkansas, one of the poorest states in this country.¹⁵ It is very likely that she is first in her family to go to college.¹⁶ Because she is likely an Arkansan, she is more likely than women residents of more than forty other states to be subjected to domestic violence.¹⁷ Because of her age, she is more likely than all the other women in Arkansas to be subjected to domestic violence.¹⁸ She is also more likely to be unemployed, more subject to violent crime, more likely to be disabled, has access to fewer doctors (MDs and PhDs), and has a lower yearly income than citizens of most other states.¹⁹ In short, my student is—on a variety of measures—among the least privileged, the most disadvantaged, and the most underserved. She is among the most vulnerable. Although her vulnerability is not identical to mine—indeed in many ways it is far more devastating—our vulnerabilities have certain features in common. Her vulnerability, like mine, leaves her with a

sense inefficacy, a sense that her agency does not function as it should. She, too, is led to question herself. She must wonder what she has or has not done that has led her to find her agency undermined on so many fronts. Ideological imperviousness must be an nearly irresistible temptation to someone in her position.

My students, like me, are managing an ever-increasing sense that despite their best efforts, most of the world, even their own small portion of it, is beyond their control, that their agency is vulnerable to unfair and unexpected impediments that they have no hope of overcoming. The grab for ideological invulnerability is a tool to combat this vulnerability, but it is a lousy tool. The student from our case is not only the beneficiary of this criticism-free worldview; she is constrained by it, as well. She is free not to be criticized for her views, but also required not to be critical of them. She is protected from insights about these worldviews that might indicate how they harm her as much as they benefit her. She is protected from the developing a critical eye that would help her to separate the principles and obligations to which her religion commits her from those to which it does not. She is protected from developing the skills to recognize the difference between reasonable criticism and scorn. She is protected from developing the ability to distinguish those who expect and reward mutual respect from those bent on repressing core elements of her identity. She is protected from developing the ability to separate those who could be her allies from those who would use her as a pawn in the acquisition and power and wealth that is far beyond what she can imagine. Ideological invulnerability comes at too high a cost.

Even if my students do not need to criticize their own religious, cultural, and political commitments as *the source* of the disadvantages they face in virtue of gender, race, class,

sexuality, and ability, they would benefit from developing skills that will help them navigate the world that creates these disadvantages. A critical perspective is one of those skills. The Bible Belt—the set of fourteen states in which the vast majority of citizens adhere to some religion, mainly fundamentalist Baptist Christianity—also includes several of the poorest states in the nation, several states ranked with the least commitment to and success in both higher and lower education, and several states with the highest unemployment rates.²⁰ These are states where ideological invulnerability is matched with significant material disadvantages. This is who my students are.

Let me reiterate a couple of things from my observations so far, about these students and the situation in which we find ourselves: I think that their conservatism is at least rooted in a defensible position even though I do not agree with it. I think that the corruption of conservatism both leads to and is explained by a quite understandable impulse: the impulse away from vulnerability.

Accepting Vulnerability, Rejecting Ideological Imperviousness

In conclusion, I would like to say a bit about the strategy I employ against ideological imperviousness. As a person, I weigh my vulnerability against that of my students and see them doing the same. As a teacher, I weigh my pedagogical obligations against their desire to hold fast to something “certain.” As a philosopher, particularly one interested in ethics, I am drawn to an insight about vulnerability—particularly the vulnerability that ideological imperviousness defends against; this insight I feel I must share with my students. In my dream world, student complaints like the one in our exemplar are ignored and mocked; I, too, dream of imperviousness. In reality, however, I cannot help but notice that I am not entitled to it. I incur

obligations to my students as teacher, as philosopher, but also as fellow citizen, person of the world. At base, these obligations share something in common with all my obligations. They make me answerable. I must answer the critiques of those to whom I am obligated, of those who are impacted by my actions. I am not necessarily obliged to retreat from my position; I am, however, required to take up sincerely the task of accounting for my actions. This requirement leaves me with some vulnerability. It leaves open the possibility that I will have to reconsider or give up some idea that people I trust have encouraged me to believe or that I will have to relinquish some belief central to my self-understanding. In our current climate, it even leaves open the possibility that I will have to account for and justify my pedagogical strategies and research interests on pain of public scorn and threats against my material well-being. This is a great deal to ask. Any less, however, asks those to whom we are obligated willfully to give up their agency and subjugate themselves to mine.

The student from my case has misunderstood a fairly complex but defensible principle: conservatism. She has misapplied this mutilated principle to her life by demanding or expecting ideological imperviousness. This move — grasping at ideological imperviousness — is understandable; it is part of a project of managing a significant and growing vulnerability. Though understandable, this move is not excusable. This particular vulnerability, the risk taken in shared agency, is a necessary component of sincere engagement with others as equals. We must allow ourselves to be vulnerable to their criticism. We must conceive of ourselves as accountable to them, as owing accounts and explanations of the actions we take that impact them. Anything less is a step onto the path of a classic strategy in social oppression.

Through this, I can see an answer to the serious moral and pedagogical questions that teaching in a climate of conservatism poses: I must accept the vulnerability that legitimately results from participation in the practice of collegiate education. Thus, I will talk about the problem of race as a good example of what philosophy has to say about science (because it is a good example and is probably slightly more accessible to most of my students than the debate between Newtonian physics and Quantum physics). I will question whether Descartes' mind/body problem makes any sense if you are a woman, or a person of color, or a laborer. I will identify the perspectives that bring these challenges to light as critical and feminist. I will identify them as my own. When the question later in the semester inevitably comes, "So Miss Jeanine, I saw that you're teaching Women's Studies next semester. Who takes that? Is that class just full of man-haters?," I will take a deep breath and smile, and explain, and correct their misconceptions as best I can. I will give them the benefit of the doubt, take my role as teacher seriously, and model ideological vulnerability. I must do this because: it is necessary, it is owed to those who are vulnerable relative to us, those who share their agency with us, it is a way to teach them about this necessary vulnerability, and in the end, I think it makes for darn good philosophy.

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¹ To be clear, while I think these challenges apply particularly to folks who teach and think Critically—where that refers to things like feminist and critical race theory—these worries also extend, though possibly to a lesser degree, to those whose thinking and teaching tends to be critical in virtue of questioning "foundational" principles of any sort.

² In isolation, these phenomena range from annoying to perfectly acceptable; especially acceptable is the intellectual challenge posed by critical exploration of standard philosophical topics, such as liberalism and bioethics, from nontraditional perspectives. Ultimately, what interests me is what is to be made of all of these phenomena *taken together*.

³ These cases continue to evolve (and their continued evolution is an important element of the story I wish to tell here). For a taste of the relevant phenomenon consider: Associated Press, "University of Colorado Professor in 9/11 Controversy Appeals to Keep Job," *New York Times: Education* (7 July 2006); Saree Makdissi, "Witch Hunt At UCLA," *Los Angeles Times Opinion: Op-Ed* (22 January 2006); David Horowitz, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2006), respectively.

⁴ I recognize that in accord with my thought experiment, part of what is going on here is that my student is mistaken about the motivations for my actions (that they are motivated by political or religious biases as opposed to my pedagogical obligations). However, I take that to be irrelevant. What is pertinent is what *she believes* to be the explanation of my behavior.

⁵ There seem to be a variety of strategies for claiming this privilege. Many scorn the critical perspective based on its resulting in the failure to fulfill some obligation or instantiate some important virtue. My exemplar student appeals to something like the failure to respect religious freedom: she ought not be subjected to any criticism of her religious views because it is a failure to uphold liberal commitment of freedom of religion. In other instances, "the critical viewpoint" is found to be context inappropriate—i.e., religion is not pertinent to assessment of a student's ability to make arguments. To the degree that religious concerns impact the assessment of the student, I have failed to uphold my pedagogical obligations. Still other times it is argued that the silencing of some view is justified as that view constitutes some sort of disloyalty. This seems to be a favorite of political chat shows like that of Bill O'Reilly.

⁶ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 59.

⁷ Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Independent School* 49, no. 2 (Winter 1990): 31-35. Origin *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies* (Wellesley, Massachusetts: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1988).

⁸ Stephanie Simon, "Christians Sue for the Right Not to Tolerate Policies," *Los Angeles Times* (10 April 2006).

⁹ I do not actually believe that any form of Christianity demands that you speak out against homosexuality, for example, but it is important to note that even the belief that she has misconstrued the demands of her religion does not legitimize criticism of her.

¹⁰ I am using terms like "agency" and "agent" in a fairly specific way. I refer to the capacity to act for reasons and the person who has said capacity. In short, I am employing something akin to Korsgaard's conception of agents and agency, found in Christine Korsgaard in her discussion of the nature of action in "Lecture One: The Metaphysical Foundations of Normativity" (paper presented at the annual Locke Lectures, Oxford, England, May and June 2002), 5 - 12.

¹¹ John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," *The Philosophical Review* 64, no.1 (January 1955): 3-32.

¹² My argument makes use of an excellent treatment of the role that practices have in group action found in Tamar Shapiro, in her "Compliance, Complicity, and the Nature of Nonideal Conditions," *Journal of Philosophy* 100, no.7 (July 2003): 329 – 55.

¹³ Arguably, my position might still be defensible even by fundamentalist Baptists' standards if I were to argue that the student does not state the relationship of her claims to the facts revealed by fundamentalist Baptist Christian doctrine. However, since philosophers often defend other arguments with unstated premises, the student, et al. could still argue that I was being unfair on those grounds, especially in light of their perception of their doctrine as not merely undeniable but ubiquitous.

¹⁴ Derrick Bell, *Faces At the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1993).

¹⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2006," (28 June 2005), <<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/overview.html>> (16 July 2006); Institute for Research on Poverty, "State Poverty Rates," (6 December 2004), <<http://www.irp.wisc.edu/faqs/faq3.htm#state>> (16 July 2006).

¹⁶ Arkansas State University Communications Office, "ASU Receives McNair Program Grant Through Federal Trio Program," (19 June 2003), <<http://asunews.astate.edu/McNair.htm>> (16 July 2006).

¹⁷ University of Arkansas, "Study Reveals Impact of Domestic Violence on Workplace," (5 October 2005), <<http://dailyheadlines.uark.edu/5461.htm>> (16 July, 2006).

¹⁸ University of Arkansas, "Legal Services Key to Reducing Domestic Violence," Daily Headlines (21 November 2002), <<http://dailyheadlines.uark.edu/3175.htm>> (16 July, 2006).

¹⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2006," (28 June 2005), <<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/overview.html>> (16 July 2006).

²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, "Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2006."

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