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Safety, Dignity and the Quest for a Democratic Campus Culture

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In his excellent paper, Callan (2016) differentiates intellectual safety, which fosters smugness, indifference and lack of effort, from dignity safety, which is needed for participation, learning and engagement. He suggests that college classrooms that reject the first and espouse the second would be ones that focus on "cultivating open-mindedness in a context of disagreement and fostering the civility that would secure dignity safety for all" (p. 75).

This is an important goal, and Callan makes here a significant contribution to the current discussion—both scholarly and public—on free speech, academic freedom and dignity safety. In what follows, I (1) expand on the suggestion that dignity safety is a threshold condition, contextualizing its role in providing access and on its place in the continuum of safety requirements, (2) consider the overlaps between dignity safety and intellectual safety, and subsequently reject nobility as an appropriate basis for creating a democratic atmosphere, and (3) suggest a democratic alternative to nobility and (Callan's version of) civility for the advancement of a democratic campus culture.

(1) Safety as Access

Callan makes the following note on dignity safety:

> The value at stake here is not something to be maximized; it is rather a threshold condition that will ordinarily be taken for granted when people are secure in the knowledge that others can be relied on to treat them as equals, even when disagreement or conflict arises. (p. 68)

Callan does not expound on the role of dignity safety as a threshold condition, and I suggest that dignity (and dignity safety) as a threshold condition to participation should be seen as an aspect of the overall debate regarding the expansion of access to higher education. What is a threshold condition for intellectual engagement in an institutional setting? Access is the basic condition an institution needs to satisfy in order to create an environment where open exchange is encouraged.

Individuals can face many types of hurdles on their way to full access. First, to access an institutional context such as a college classroom, a student needs to be allowed in. Denial of access was common among higher education institutions for members of many groups, such as women and various minority groups in the past, and is still limited for undocumented students. Beyond formal permission to attend, a prospective student needs to have the required credentials too—a high school

diploma, appropriate SAT scores and the like. Members of many groups see their access as limited by structural hurdles to achieving these requirements. The debate on affirmative action and class- or race-conscious admissions policies is tied to the efforts to overcome these structural barriers, and it parallels the current debate in its search for conditions that allow equality for all. Finally, once a student arrives on campus, having been permitted to apply as a member of her group (women, people of color, non-citizens, etc.) and found to be eligible by her credentials, one last hurdle (or set of hurdles) remains. The threshold for full participation for students in a given classroom is constituted of less tangible but no less real requirements to fit in with the norms and expectations of an academic classroom generally, and of the particular classroom in which they are seated. Dignity safety is one such norm, which should be key to all classrooms, as its absence limits the substantive access of some members of the community. Without dignity safety, as Callan shows, students fear humiliation, ridicule and rejection and are therefore partially or wholly barred from taking full advantage of their learning opportunities. But it is hard to fully understand the impact of limited dignity safety—or, in other words, the impact that an unsafe classroom context would have on those who experience it as such—without recognizing that this is the last in a series of hurdles that members of some groups face on the road to the college classroom.

Dignity safety in this sense is an aspect of access. Limiting the access of members of a group merely because of their gender, racial or other identity traits constitutes an unjustified harm to them, and also impoverishes the academic environment for all. The hurdles and barriers that are unequally distributed across different social, racial and other groups in society must be recognized if we are to properly interpret the demand for dignity safety. For many, the road to the classroom was longer and fraught with difficulties that others never faced. For them to then regularly have to justify their presence, their eligibility and their capacity to contribute is an insult added to injury.

In addition to being another one in a set of barriers to access, dignity safety is also an aspect of the overall safety considerations that higher education institutions, and especially some of their students, grapple with. I agree with Callan that stereotype threat offers a possible lens into these less concrete but no less significant aspects of access. While the literature and interventions around stereotype threat are directed toward performance rather than dignity, they are informative in regards to the emotional and social barriers created by an atmosphere that is not dignity safe. I suggest though that the focus on stereotypes and their related threats and harms is a limited lens through which to look at the kind of limitations posed before members of stereotyped identity groups.

Terms like "threat" and "harm" as well as "safety" are used in much of this debate as metaphors, or at most as pertaining to hurdles to academic pursuits. But for members of stereotyped groups—sexual minorities, racial minorities, religious minorities, women—these terms are all but metaphors. The attacks on their dignity safety in the classroom are but one aspect of the ongoing harms that they face: intellectual, physical, social and sexual harms or threats, all lobbed at them as they try to make their way into the academic context from which their ancestors or predecessors were barred.

Imagine Jasmine, a Black student living in a dorm that carries the name of a slaveholder. She is experiencing an ongoing challenge to her dignity safety, a challenge to her sense of belonging in the institute where she is pursuing her education. This is part of her overall experience as a member of the academic community. She witnesses in person or online the physical assaults on members of her race, and shares their experience of facing an ongoing sense of physical vulnerability in certain social contexts. As a woman on campus, she is aware of being the potential subject of sexual harassment,

threats and violence. The toll of this ongoing demand to resist and respond to threats is heavy, but often remains unspoken and thus unintelligible to those not experiencing it. The resilience required for sustaining one's commitment to intellectual pursuits through this effort often goes unrecognized. The stereotype threat that Jasmine faces in the classroom, expressed in the assumptions that some of her peers or professors would have that she is less adequate, less prepared, or has less to contribute than others in the room, is one on a long list of threats she has to overcome every day.

The demand for dignity safety in the classroom is better understood in light of this compound context of threats and harms. For Jasmine to demand that she is recognized as an intellectual equal in the classroom, and that she is not humiliated or dismissed when voicing her ideas, is part of an effort to establish an overall sense of safety in a social context that is often unsafe in more ways than one for members of some groups, which together constitute the majority of members on campuses and in society. The affirmation of dignity safety as a threshold condition for access should thus be understood not only as part of the psychological effort to reduce stereotype threat or the overall liberal effort to allow all members the necessary conditions to participate in shared intellectual pursuits; it should also be understood as part of the struggle against the marginalization of, and assault against, members of various groups in society, and in this light it should be seen as a way of promoting various forms of safety which are necessary for extending the concept and reality of human dignity to all members of the community.

(2) Dignity Versus Nobility

Callan suggests that education "must often take on an agonistic spirit as settled beliefs and values are subject to critique that some students will find distressing or exhilarating, or both at the same time" (p. 65). Challenging intellectual safety, or the attachment to one's unquestioned beliefs, requires maintaining the conditions where every student's dignity is affirmed while many students' intellectual boundaries and foundations are contested. This vision of education has long informed the kind of intellectual exploration that philosophers espouse. It brings to mind Socrates' gadfly, his suggestion that the role of philosophers—and of intellectually honest teachers—is to sting, to disturb, to knock their students off their path. The best education questions taken-for-granted habits of mind, Callan suggests in light of this long liberal tradition. It awakens, enlightens, forces us to reconsider our assumptions and the foundations of our world view. Thus Callan's rejection of demands for intellectual safety on the grounds that it limits the desirable exchange of ideas in the classroom parallels the traditional notion of academic freedom: the protection of openness and honesty even in the face of the potential rattling of safe, accepted assumptions.

But the neat distinction between the acceptance of dignity safety and the rejection of intellectual safety, while valid on paper and in some teaching contexts, is not always possible in the reality of the campus. Specifically, realizing a culture of equal dignity requires a stronger opposition than Callan is willing to acknowledge between the culture of nobility and the democratic context that diverse institutions of learning are struggling to produce. Callan suggests that being disabused of a sense of superiority need not be humiliating, and does not need to produce a sense of inferiority (p. 67). But the geometric vision of equality here is no more than an abstract notion, dismissed by those whose sense of superiority as members of self-appointed upper class groups sustains their self-worth and therefore

their dignity. Understanding themselves as belonging to a group that is either objectively better—stronger, smarter, more deserving—or at least one that merits others' deference because of long-standing and well-grounded traditions constitutes a key aspect of their identity. Therefore, giving up that aspect as a result of encountering a feminist campus culture, the demands of Black Lives Matter activists and supporters, and the like, can truthfully be described by some of them as causing dignity harm.

Consider Joe, a traditionally raised young man, who views his dignity as intimately tied with and expressed by his physical and intellectual superiority over women, his sexual "conquests," or his sense of his significance as a chivalrous protector of women. This young man does not see himself as a throwback relic of a lost era, but rather perceives his view on the gendered division of space and roles as stemming from a commitment to religious, cultural and social values. Perhaps all of these are more sensed than articulated in his mind—he was raised to be a good man, and he is committed to being this particular type of good man. Joe's confidence in his capacities, along with his skills and upbringing, win him a spot in a selective college. There he encounters to his utter surprise the demand to abandon his vision of himself as a good man, of the relational demands it puts on him and the ethical expectations he worked hard to fulfil. These are to be replaced by a view of women as his equals, completed by a rejection of his previous worldview as antiquated and offensive.

Clearly, shaking Joe's views is acceptable, and in a sense required by both principles Callan endorses. His female classmates' dignity safety—or true access—would be harmed if he protests their presence in the classroom, or insists on questioning their intellectual abilities. His education will additionally express the laziness and indifference termed "intellectual safety" if his views are left unchallenged. But is there any price being paid for challenging his views? At least in a small way, requiring Joe to abandon his views as offensive to women actually constitutes a breach of both his intellectual safety and his dignity safety, as he is expected to put aside a part of himself, a dimension of his core values, in order to enter the classroom. This type of dignity harm, while based in disabusing people of mistaken notions of superiority, is hard to distinguish (at least psychologically) from the dignity harms caused by racism, sexism, and other forms of morally reprehensible and ungrounded superiority claims. "Of course," Callan tells us, "disparities of power and wealth still routinely mean that some get away with treating others as if they were servile. But for people who exercise that power, those of us who care about human dignity reserve … contempt" (p. 67). However, contempt was not due to those whose nobility meant that they were allowed to treat others as servile. In fact, one of the casual benefits of nobility was the blameless permit to give orders, to present oneself as superior, to exploit.

The rejection of Joe's views at least partially constitutes an environment of intellectual safety, where ideas are rejected for the sake of a more accepting atmosphere, because clearly they are challenged more readily than the views of those who come to campus with a clear intellectual and social commitment to gender equality. This of course is the line of argument espoused regularly by conservative thinkers who challenge liberals to accept—or at least continue hearing and debating—their positions. It is also the line of argument famously suggested by the former president of Harvard when he publicly considered—for the sake of intellectual exploration, as he tried to clarify—whether women's brains, and perhaps also social upbringing, make them less fitting to pursue math and science at the highest levels. He saw the uproar that resulted from this intellectual exploration as an expression of intellectual safety, of laziness of thought in the face of his daring hypothesis, and he also may have seen it as

hampering the dignity safety of those who would like to explore ideas like his but who are shut down in campus classrooms as a result of their views. For his critics, this was a case of a higher education leader questioning the capacities of many of his constituents, and in this way limiting their full access to the classroom (as students and teachers) by exploring ideas that characterized Western thought for a very long time.

It is harder to address the claim that ensuring dignity safety for Joe's female peers constitutes not only a challenge to Joe's intellectual safety—which is a good step—but also a challenge to his dignity safety, which is to be rejected, if we continue to hold on as Callan does to the analogy between the dignity of nobility and the dignity associated with mass democracy. A main aspect of nobility status was the opportunity to take advantage of lower-class others, and of women, as an expression of one's higher standing. This would include taking advantage of their manual labor, demanding sexual favors of them, as well as benefiting from other established rights of nobility. It is unclear how those benefits translate into a mass democratic context, and if they do not, as I assume, it is unclear that the status that remains is similar enough to the original one in ways that make it useful for a discussion about college campuses in a democratic environment.

Moreover, the dignity harms to women or members of racial minorities that result from the cumulative acts of subtle humiliation (or "microagressions") are often the result of unplanned and unintended acts of those who hold a clear and untroubled sense of superiority. Overcoming those, as Callan recognizes, is necessary for establishing the threshold condition of dignity safety. But to achieve it, disabusing more privileged members of the community of their unearned sense of superiority would be a painful but unavoidable step.

In the next and final section I consider an alternative to extending the rights of nobility to all and instituting civility as a classroom norm as a way to ensure dignity safety.

(3) Civility Versus Equality

Civility represents for Callan an effort to reconcile the tensions between academic freedom and dignity safety. I suggest that civility falls short of this goal, essentially because the version of it that Callan promotes is based on the extension of nobility, whereas what is needed to reconcile the challenges common to contemporary college classrooms and campuses are solutions rooted in democratic, egalitarian principles.

The demands of civility parallel the current discussion on political correctness. Opponents of "PC culture" claim that overly sensitive Millennials are leading a ridiculous effort to cleanse the language, and corresponding social norms and culture, of any reference to differences among social groups. In other words, they view PC as a way to protect the indifference and laziness that characterize intellectual safety, or as expressing a refusal to take intellectual risks and consider different opinions, views and positions. Proponents see PC as a way to create a space where all are appreciated, feel welcomed, and enjoy an environment in which their contributions and questions are appreciated rather than ridiculed. In other words, they see (certain forms of) political correctness as a way to ensure dignity safety for all.

The version of civility espoused by Callan fails to respond to this tension and therefore to reconcile current challenges on campus because is too closely tied to the demands of nobility. It arises from the expectation that people behave appropriately, according to social norms that were often established

when the social composition of the institution or the citizenry was vastly different than it is today: "It parallels the honorable comportment by means of which nobles could evince due respect for their peers within an aristocratic society" (p. 71). Civil candor and charitable interpretation do not sufficiently recognize the continuum of access and safety I discussed. It therefore forbids outright mocking, racist or misogynistic declarations and physical harm, but it still might not affect the use of "muted and surreptitious attitudes of disdain" (p. 68). These serve as the basic currency of dignity harms, and as an effective and persistent mechanism of shutting members of marginalized groups out of the conversation, and out of the loci of power. The widespread sense of members of groups newer to the institution—women, first generation students, members of many minority groups—that they do not belong, that they are imposters, is at least in part a result of messages expressed through these muted responses to their contributions, or even to their presence.

Moreover, the civility expectation of the college classroom, if and where it is implemented, prioritizes a certain decorum, as Callan seems to suggest, and restricts expressions of emotions like anger, frustration and disaffection. In that it leaves limited tools in the hands of those who continue to feel underserved by the now-civil institutions they were finally allowed to join. "The virtue [of civility] shines particularly bright in circumstances of conflict or disagreement, when anger or frustration inclines us to hostility and recrimination. Civility constrains speech, as any virtue does" (p. 18). The form of respect expected by Callan's civility seems to allow only "appropriate" or "noble" forms of expression to count as civil, whereas those traditionally ascribed to women and to "lesser" cultures—excitement, anger, tears—continue to be rejected and censored.

The master's tools, as Audre Lorde noted, will never dismantle the master's house. The universalization of the benefits of nobility, which Callan endorses from Waldron's work, and the extension of the benefits of nobility to all who were its subjects—women, persons with disabilities, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities—is unlikely to ensure dignity safety, and other crucial forms of access and safety, to members of these groups on campus. Suggesting that this type of civility is a key tool for creating a welcoming atmosphere in the college classroom amounts to silencing those who prefer forms of expression that go beyond the norms of nobility.

A democratic, egalitarian classroom culture, rather than one built on the norms of nobility, could promote full access to the learning opportunities that colleges should offer all students. Such culture would be based on three principles: ensuring equal substantive access to the campus and to the classroom; maintaining dignity safety along with, and as part of a commitment to, other forms of safety; and encouraging varying forms of expression and the freedom to speak and question both within and beyond the classroom. This view is surely not in opposition with Callan's. My goal in outlining these principles has been to offer a broader contextualization and possible ways to extend Callan's vision so as to ensure a healthier, more democratic campus culture.

References

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