



PHONY TOLERANCE

Mortimer Adler

I would like to offer an explanation of the widely prevalent misunderstanding of what a good Socratic seminar should be. More than an explanation of that misunderstanding, it points to the reason why many teachers will recoil from the correct understanding that I am here offering, to replace the misunderstanding that now prevails.

The reason that many teachers will resist or even resent being told that in conducting seminars as Socratic moderators of them they should regard themselves as superior to their students (as they do regard themselves as superior when they are engaged in didactic teaching) lies in a malaise that pervades the whole academic world.

In our schools and colleges, both students and teachers suppose that, outside the sphere of mathematics, the exact sciences, history and even sometimes social studies, there are no right and wrong answers to questions, no true and false propositions, no adequate and inadequate arguments or explanations.

That being the case, how dare teachers correct students in seminars when the questions raised are not about matters of fact or answerable in terms of well-established knowledge in a given field of sub-


ject matter? And if they dared to do so, wouldn't they be faced by students who challenged their right to do so?

The cultural or intellectual malaise of which I speak can be described as phony tolerance. It denounces as dogmatic and authoritarian anyone who regards one person's opinion as better than another's. It translates everyone's right to hold whatever opinions can be espoused into an acquiescence in the view that all opinions are equally tenable, no one better, sounder, truer than another.

Freedom of thought and expression includes the freedom to be wrong as well as to be right; it does not abolish the distinction between right and wrong. It also involves the freedom to change your mind when contrary evidence advanced and reasons given should cause you to change your mind when you are wrong. Your right to hold whatever opinion you happen to espouse in no way guarantees that the opinion you happen to hold is right, nor does it mean that you should not yield to correction and not change your mind if it can be shown that you are wrong.

Teachers who, in conducting seminars, fail to correct students when they are wrong, because they misunderstand the meaning of freedom of thought and discussion, do not discharge their obligation as teachers. Students who resist being corrected or cry out that they are being intimidated by their teachers who correct them do not discharge their obligation as students. They lack the essential virtue of students—docility, which is a mean between subservience and contentiousness. The use of the word "intimidation" indicates that both the teachers and the students misunderstand their relationship and their mutual obligation to one another.

I recommend to all who aspire to become truly Socratic or teacher moderators of seminars that they read the best statement ever made about freedom of thought and expression. It is to be found in the second chapter of J. S. Mill's great essay *On Liberty*. I also recommend reading the chapters on truth in a book of mine, *Six Great Ideas*, especially chapters 6-8.

This is the medicine that may help cure the malaise I have called phony twentieth-century tolerance. Without that cure being effected for students and teachers, there is little hope that they will ever enjoy the profit, and the pain as well as the pleasure, of good Socratic seminars. 

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor
Ken Dzuga, Senior Fellow and Archivist
A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.
Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.