
The Luxury of Doubt

The cure for a divided world is offered most insistently to the people least able to afford it.

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In the winter of 2006 a philosopher from McGill carried Plato into the West Bank. Carlos Fraenkel had arranged to teach a seminar at Al-Quds University, in the hills outside Jerusalem, and the book he later made of that work, *Teaching Plato in Palestine*, is among the more honest accounts we have of what philosophy is supposed to be for ¹. His wager is plain and serious. People divided by interest, by faith, by border, can be brought into a common room and taught to reason together, and in the reasoning they will loosen their hold on the convictions they never actually chose. He builds the case on a word from the tradition he is addressing. *Taqlid*, the uncritical acceptance of inherited authority, is the condition to be escaped. Against it he sets fallibilism, the willingness to treat even your deepest belief as something that could be wrong and could be revised. From fallibilism he draws a culture of debate, and beneath that culture he lays a single non-negotiable rule, the freedom to say what you think. The image under all of it is the oldest one the discipline owns. Leave the cave of shadows and opinion. Walk out into the light.

It is a generous book, written by a serious man, and it deserves to be met before it is answered. Fraenkel is not naive about power, and he does not pretend the seminar is a paradise. He went to the places most people only theorize about, sat in the rooms, and reported what was said. The argument earns its hearing.

The question it never quite asks is who can afford to doubt.

Fallibilism arrives in the book as a virtue, a discipline of the honest mind, open to anyone willing to practice it. It is not, or not only. Before it is a virtue it is a position, and the position has conditions. To hold a belief loosely, as a hypothesis you would give up if the argument went against you, you must first be secure enough that being wrong costs you little. A tenured professor can revise his view of justice on a Tuesday and lose nothing but an old opinion. The same revision asked of a man whose claim to his land rests on a history he is told to hold provisionally is not the same act, and to call both of them by the one word fallibilism is to hide the difference that matters most. Doubt is not free. It is purchased with safety, and safety is exactly what the divided places do not have to spend.

There is a harder version of the problem underneath that one. Fraenkel's method works on the beliefs a person has, the way a man has opinions about a tax. It does not know what to do with the belief a person is. For the communities he visits at their most exposed, the Palestinian under occupation, the Hasid keeping a world alive inside a city that has no use for it, the Mohawk holding a language against a continent, conviction is not a possession to be audited. It is the edge of the self and the last line of its defense. To ask that it be held as revisable is to ask the besieged to open the one gate that still makes them a people. Belief that has become identity cannot be set on the table as a hypothesis, because the person cannot stand anywhere outside it to do the setting. The seminar assumes a self that has already won the security to treat its commitments as detachable. Most of the world has not won it.

Behind the room there is an assumption about the kind of thing a conflict is. Fraenkel treats division as a problem with a solution, the way a hard sum has an answer if you are only patient enough to work it through. Bring the parties to the table, agree the rules, and reason will move them toward a truth they can come to share. But the conflicts he walks into are not sums, and

they do not sit still to be solved. The parties change as they are engaged. Positions harden in the act of being questioned. The table itself is not above the quarrel; it is a place inside it, set by someone, on someone's ground, in someone's language, convened by a man who has taken a side in the very act of convening. The belief that a conflict is a difficulty to be cleared away, rather than a condition to be lived inside and navigated, is the quiet engine of the whole project, and it is the place the project is most mistaken. There is a deeper assumption folded inside it. The search presumes a single truth waiting at the end, toward which honest reasoners must converge. Isaiah Berlin spent a career denying exactly that, arguing that some genuine goods are real at once and cannot both be had, that one people's survival can stand against another's justice the way liberty stands against equality, and that the choice between them is tragic rather than mistaken². If he is right, fallibilism is not only too dear for the exposed to buy. It is aimed at a target that may not be there. To ask two peoples to hold their deepest commitments as provisional, on the promise of a reconciling truth, is to promise something the world may not contain. Some divisions do not have answers. They have only the better and the worse ways of carrying them.

He half-knows this, to his credit. The book is candid about the moments when his own voice, the visiting professor with the doctorate and the foreword from Walzer, settles a room that was supposed to settle itself. He added an afterword to answer the charge that his method needs conditions his students do not have³. But the candor does not reach the foundation. An asymmetry admitted in passing is still an asymmetry, and a debate in which one voice arrives pre-weighted is not the open field the theory describes. It is the field plus a thumb.

And there is the question of what is being carried, and to whom. The culture of debate enters the book as an export, a discipline brought from the seminar rooms of the West into places imagined to be without it. The places are not without it. The Islamic tradition Fraenkel addresses produced *munazara*, formal public disputation with its own rules of evidence and rebuttal, and *kalam*, a whole science of argument about the highest things, both of them centuries older than the seminar he convenes⁴. These were not quiet traditions. They were forged in schism, in the political and theological quarrels that split the early community and were never settled. To carry debate to the heirs of that inheritance as though it were a gift is not a neutral act. It repeats, in the gentlest register available, the oldest move of the outsider, to arrive bearing the light and to discover the natives in shadow.

He need not have reached as far as the tradition. He had only to look across his own table. Fraenkel did not teach over Palestinians; he taught beside Sari Nusseibeh, the president of Al-Quds University and a scholar of Avicenna, a philosopher of the very lineage the book treats as missing from the room⁵. The debate it proposes to deliver was already seated at the other end of it, as peer and as host. That fact, which the book itself records, undoes the import frame more completely than any argument from history could, because it shows the visitor was never the only person present who could think.

Which returns me to the claim beneath all the others, the one Fraenkel turns upside down and I want to set back on its feet. He treats conflict as the obstacle to thought, the noise reason has to quiet before it can do its work. The history of the discipline says the reverse. Philosophy

is not what arrives to end a conflict. It is what a conflict makes. Plato wrote because his city killed his teacher, and the dialogues are a quarrel with Athens, not a seminar held safely above it. Kalam was born in the fight over who had the right to rule the believers. The traditions of disputation grew in societies that argued because the alternative to argument was the sword, and often enough the sword had already been tried. Serious thought has almost never come out of peace. It comes from the pressure of a division that will not close, from people forced to give reasons because force alone has failed them. Conflict is not the enemy of the examined life. It is its cause.

So the case is not against philosophy, and nothing here lets anyone off the duty to think. It is against a particular picture of where philosophy stands. Fraenkel puts it at a table above the fight, neutral, clean, offering its method down to the combatants like a rope into a pit. The truer place is lower and harder. Thought does not hover over the conflict; it lives inside it, situated, partial, paid for, done by people who cannot step out of their own position and have to reason anyway. The examined life is not less available under siege. It is differently located, and arguably it is more itself there, because there it is not a leisure but a necessity. What Fraenkel offers as the cure misreads where the disease is, and worse, misreads where the medicine already grows. To tell a divided people that they will be saved by learning to doubt is to overlook that their doubt, their argument, their long unfinished quarrel with their own certainties, is the one thing the condition has never let them put down.

That misreading is not innocent, and it is not only an error of theory. To stand outside a conflict and name the people in it as the ones who must learn to think is to take a position in the conflict while claiming to rise above it. The seminar that believes itself neutral is the most situated room of all. And there is something it skips on the way in. Before the other is a mind to be corrected he is a person one is answerable to, and the first movement across a line of conflict may be an obligation rather than an argument, a responsibility owed before any understanding is reached⁶. A method that opens by asking the divided to doubt has already stepped over that debt, which does not wait for the seminar to be convened. The work worth doing does not begin by bringing the light in from elsewhere. It begins by reasoning from inside the dark, which is the only place, here or anywhere, that anyone has ever actually thought.

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NOTES

1. Carlos Fraenkel, *Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), with a foreword by Michael Walzer. The seminar at Al-Quds University opens the book; later chapters move to Indonesia, a Hasidic community in New York, Brazil, and the Mohawk community at Kahnawake. The chain from taqlid through fallibilism to a culture of debate, with freedom of expression as the one non-negotiable, is developed across the second half.
2. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). The doctrine at issue is value pluralism, that genuine goods are several and sometimes incompatible, and that the choice among them is a tragic loss rather than a correctable error. It is the position that unsettles the single truth a joint search is meant to approach.
3. Fraenkel added an afterword answering the objection that his method presupposes conditions, security, standing, the room to be wrong, that his students in the divided places do not have. The reply is honest, and it stays in the appendix; a precondition conceded at the end does not repair a method that assumed it throughout.
4. On formal disputation, *munazara*, and the dialectical theology of *kalam*, and on their origins in the political and theological schisms of the early community rather than in any imported culture of debate, see Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra* (Berlin: De Gruyter), with the classical adab al-bahth literature on the rules of argument.
5. Sari Nusseibeh, philosopher and former president of Al-Quds University, a scholar of Avicenna and the author of *Once Upon a Country: A Palestinian Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) and *What Is a Palestinian State Worth?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). He hosted and shared the teaching of the seminar Fraenkel describes.
6. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969). The claim invoked is that ethics precedes knowledge, that responsibility to the other comes before, and conditions, any attempt to comprehend him or to argue with him.
7. The reading runs against, and draws its pressure from, several positions it does not pause to name in the text. On conflict as the irreducible substance of politics rather than a defect to be deliberated away, see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2000) and *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013); the aim, in her terms, is to turn antagonism among enemies into agonism among adversaries, not to dissolve it.
8. Beneath Mouffe sits Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (1932), for whom the friend and enemy distinction constitutes the political and no deliberation transcends it. The diagnosis is borrowed here; the politics he built on it is not.
9. Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), on the violence done by collapsing a person into a single belonging, and *The Argumentative Indian* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), on the long non-Western life of public reasoning.
10. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), and his binationalist work through Brit Shalom in Mandate Palestine, the nearest regional ancestor of Fraenkel's project and a cautionary one, since it was right in principle and defeated in fact.

ABOUT CORE GROUP

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