

Making Exceptions, Aristotle, and the Collapse of the World as We Know it

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A remarkable feature of the Penn State Mont Alto campus is the way faculty members seek out each other's counsel in matters related to teaching. In this spirit, one faculty member recently solicited advice about a problem that had come up in an online course she was teaching. She had originally mandated very strict deadlines in her syllabus, but after a few students claimed to have difficulty submitting their assignments online, she was wondering whether to make exceptions for them.

A few colleagues responded to offer moral support and non-directive suggestions. Then a colleague weighed in like a crash of thunder in a summer sky. He sternly warned her that she would lose all credibility if she made any exceptions to her syllabus. This is how he explained it:

Making exceptions to your own policy statements does three things. First, it opens you up to claims of unfairness. What makes one person's excuse more valid than another's? Second, it damages your own credibility with your students. Instead of being the professor, you become known as a push-over, and no one respects a push-over. Tied to that, third, it undermines your authority in your own classroom. After all, if YOU don't even bother to follow YOUR OWN policies, why should anyone else?...[In addition] earning a zero for failing to follow directions is a valuable lesson. Indeed, only a person who cares about students will have the courage to teach them such valuable lessons in life....

Hmmm....

Although this statement troubled me from the start, I wasn't clear why. I knew it wasn't because I would have made the exceptions the statement argues so passionately against. (I would have made them as a requirement of justice, not as a gift of mercy.) And it wasn't because the statement seems to emasculate my choice by stating that "only" those who refuse to make the exceptions I was willing to make would have the "courage" to teach "valuable lessons in life." (I took that as rhetorical hyperbole, not as the assertion of an empirical connection. Also, I have been known to engage in a bit of hyperbole myself, so I could appreciate the passion of that particular flourish without taking it personally.) It wasn't even because I thought the statement was entirely wrong. (Much of what it said I could accept as correct.) Still, something troubled me about the statement—so much so, in fact, that I had come to think the advice it was offering as wrong-headed, out of touch, and more likely to harm than to help.

As I continued to examine my own reaction, I came to realize that I was viewing the situation from the vantage of a different notion of authority, one capable of supporting a softer, less defensive pattern of response. I also came to realize that I was operating with a different sensibility regarding what constitutes appropriate faculty behavior in an environment of higher learning. Since each of these realizations struck me as significant, I wrote this essay to explore, clarify and defend them. The bulk of the essay articulates the philosophical background for these two realizations, and it ends with a line-by-line response to the above quoted statement.

Although it is possible to skip directly to the line-by-line analysis, I don't think it will be possible to make full sense of it without the intervening philosophical background.

Let me, therefore, begin with the philosophical background.

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Aristotle characterizes “prudence” as the ability to make good judgments in fuzzy situations, and he further identifies prudence as the most important of the practical virtues, constituting nothing less than the keystone of an effective, practical life. I mention this because in working with my colleague over the years, I have had numerous opportunities to observe that he possesses the virtue of prudence in generous measure.

Aristotle also suggests that in deliberations where certainty is impossible and opinions can be reasonably divided—and the original issue raised is a classic example of this—it is advisable to take careful and respectful note of the opinions voiced by prudent people like our colleague. The word Aristotle used for the established opinions of prudent people is “doxa,” which forms the root of our word “orthodoxy.” It is fair to say, I think, that he articulates the current “doxa” of this situation. Indeed, it is specifically because he is giving voice to widely shared beliefs about human motivation and the nature of authority that he is able to speak with such authoritative finality. And as strong as his words are, I suspect most faculty will read them more as a reminder of what they already know and even take to be “obvious” than as an assertion of command telling them what they must do.

The reason for this has to do with a sort of pre-established “match” between what Al is saying and the sense of “obviousness” created by the (mostly unconscious) functioning of the filters, templates, and conceptual mechanisms that constitute the specific ways meaning is created and decoded in the academic community. In short, what he is saying is able to seem “obvious” because “just-do-what-you-are-told” authoritarianism already has an operative presence in the depths of the academic mind. This is significant because it shows that my disagreement is not with my colleague but with a way of thinking already well established in academia.

Of course, to question an already established way of thinking is intimidating. In fact, if it were not for an ancient tradition in philosophy of “questioning the obvious,” I would be sunk even before setting out to attempt to show that something accepted as “obvious” by those Aristotle would recognize as the “best” people is actually (as I put it above) wrong-headed, out of touch, and as likely to harm as to help. It is only when I recall how often what is accepted as “obvious” has ended up being exposed as a mere prejudice of the time—like Aristotle’s own acceptance of the naturalness of slavery—that I am able to summon the gumption to attempt this perilous journey.

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So what makes it possible for rational, thoughtful people to accept as “obvious” what is subsequently revealed to be merely a prejudice of the time? The answer has to do with how our brains work. The notion that a properly ordered brain functions like a camera by mirroring what it sees is now thoroughly discredited in cognitive science. A newer understanding sees the brain functioning less like a camera and more like a movie director. The idea is that our brains do not “reflect” what we see but rather “constructs” it by means of complex cognitive mechanisms operating beneath the threshold of our ordinary conscious awareness. We now know that before our sensory perceptions even get to our awareness, they are processed through a complex underground network of cognitive filters and narrative templates. Accordingly, what appears in our conscious awareness as direct and immediate experience is actually a highly processed, “manufactured” product. Since we do not directly experience the extensive filtering and editing involved in the manufacturing process, it is quite possible (and often the case) that the reason something seems “obvious” has more to do with how we are processing and filtering data as we “set-up” our experience in culturally specific ways than it does of the way the world is revealing itself to be. This means, of course, that the fact of a given policy being accepted as “obvious” is not the same thing as its being true, adequate, or even effective.

In spite of this, any attempt to point out the contingent and perhaps even arbitrary nature of what one is accepting as “obvious” can feel deeply threatening. John Donne has left us with some powerful poems expressing the palpable sense of disorientation and even vertigo he felt when the “obvious” fact the sun passed over a fixed Earth each day was being questioned by the new Copernican cosmology which pictured the Earth as rotating on a daily axis while circling the sun in an annual rotation. In the *Anatomy of the World* he writes,

And new philosophy calls all in doubt/The element of fire is
quite put out/The sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit/Can
well direct him where to look for it... 'Tis all in pieces, all
coherence gone/All just supply, and all relation/Prince, subject,
father, son, are things forgot.

The point here is that when people are not mindful of the constant gap between “reality” and the internal processing that “sets-up” how they perceive reality, any questioning of the latter can seem like a perverse denial of the former. For this reason, questioning what we are “set up” to accept as “obvious” can give rise to intense feelings of inner disorientation, as if the questioning itself was causing reality to buckle. When people are feeling anxious in this way, they will often respond to those who question the “obvious” by striking out at the questioners, mocking them as fools if not punishing them as heretics. The fact that this dynamic plays out among the learned helps to explain why the strongest resistance to new ways of thinking comes more from the certainty of experts than from the emotional outbursts of the uninformed. (The classic exploration of how this dynamic plays out in natural science is Thomas Kuhn’s, “*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.”)

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In order to widen the scope of the discussion at this point, let me return to Aristotle. Aristotle defines politics as the search for human betterment by public means, and he treats politics as a branch of ethics. Now even though most college teachers associate higher learning with human betterment, they do not always connect the increasingly floundering aspiration for human betterment in the classroom with its ever more frequent betrayal and denigration in our wider society. This is because most Americans, including college teachers, no longer see politics in Aristotelian terms—as an ethical imperative to serve the common good and the interests of humanity. Instead, they tend to see politics in market terms, as a zero-sum clash of private interests and selfish goods. As a result, the aspiration to serve the common good, while fully accepted and praised as idealism, is subtly denigrated by being placed in opposition to the way things “really” are. Interestingly, for Aristotle (in opposition to Plato) the “ideal” is not opposed to the “real” but is simply the “real” perfected in its essence—something he thinks is not only possible but is actually the inherent motive force of life.

Be that as it may, this denigrating opposition between idealism and reality is unfortunate in many ways, and one of those ways is that it tends to render teachers deaf and blind to the degraded “political” (in Aristotle’s sense of seeking human betterment) dynamics both of their own classrooms and of the larger world that serves as context to the classroom. Often those who are aware of this perversion of the political dynamics of the classroom find themselves subtly denigrated by being identified as “idealists,” while those who accept the perversion as normal and inevitable are deemed to be “realists.” As a result, fewer teachers connect the low quality of what often transpires in the classroom with the larger fact that we are living in a time when much of what is accepted as “obvious” (in both an ethical and a political context) is rapidly breaking down. Another way to put this is that the context of everything we now do in the classroom—and especially anything having to do with how we exercise and express “authority”—is the fact the status quo is under a growing shadow of disrepute.

Let me offer a thought experiment to focus where I want to go with this. First the background: Imagine two “equal but opposite” extremists from different parts of the world, Mike and Mustafa, each expressing his core convictions about what is “obvious.” Mike thinks it is “obvious” that Islam is an evil religion that threatens American life and freedom. Conversely, Mustafa thinks it is “obvious” that Islam is the one true religion and that modern Christian crusaders have invaded the Middle East in order to destroy the religion of true believers.

So here is the thought experiment: In our imagination, let’s switch Mike and Mustafa at birth so that Mike grows up in Mustafa’s home thinking he is Mustafa and Mustafa grows up in Mike’s home thinking he is Mike. Would Mike (who now thinks he is Mustafa) grow up thinking of himself as a Christian trapped in a Muslim body? It doesn’t seem likely. Instead, it is more likely he would have something close to Mustafa’s views about what is “obvious.” Conversely, would Mustafa (who now thinks he is Mike) grow up thinking he is a Muslim trapped in a Christian body? Again, it is not likely. It is more likely he will have some version of Mike’s views about what is “obvious.”

Why is this?

The answer has little to do with Mike or Mustafa as individuals or with the relative strength or weakness of their respective faith traditions. It has to do, rather, with what we are talking about here—the unconscious, culturally contingent, cognitive processes by which both Mike and Mustafa make their world intelligible. Each unknowingly constructs his Lebenswelt or “lifeworld” by means of a historically and culturally conditioned “world-view” or “mentality” functioning beneath the level of his ordinary awareness to “set-up” or “constitute” his ordinary waking experience. Almost certainly, the “mentality” of each—the network of filters and narrative templates functioning beneath the threshold of ordinary awareness to set up immediate experience, including a sense of the “obvious”—will be invisible to him while at the same time the “mentality” of the other will be glaringly obvious in its odiousness.

Of course, the academic mind is readily able to acknowledge that Mike and Mustafa (and most students) operate out of an unempirical “mentality” that functions beneath the threshold of their ordinary conscious awareness. However, without implying that all “mentalities” are equal, it is not as readily available to the academic mind to apprehend that there is also an academic “mentality” that functions structurally in the same way as all other mentalities—as an historically and culturally conditioned conceptual framework operating beneath the threshold of ordinary conscious awareness to render the world intelligible.

It is a great irony that the genuine integrity and strict honesty of the way the academic mind focuses on data, logic, evidence, reasoning, and proof also makes it especially difficult for academics to doubt what is deeply accepted in academia as “obvious.” As the poet says, the greatest light casts the darkest shadow. This means that even in academia the “obviousness” of a statement is no guarantee that the gap between thought and being has been narrowed sufficiently within its purview. Add to this the understandable, “human-all-too-human” resistance to change, and it begins to be possible to see the policy promoted in the statement as the voice of a sort of nascent academic “fundamentalism” that tries to respond to the challenge of change in the present by resorting to an idealized past in which the teacher is the “literal and inerrant” voice of what is best. There then comes a tendency to treat the rules and procedures of the classroom as sacrosanct, not as cultural constructs that can be adapted to make them more effective. In this way, requests for an adjustment of policy or procedure, which in the constructivist model are accepted as legitimate and regarded as essential, now begin to be treated as rejections of sacred creed, as nothing less than sins. The student asking a teacher to make an exception to her stated policy becomes like a sinner asking a preacher to change scripture so that his sins would become virtues.

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Of course, it is a truism that the world is changing. When does it not? But there is a distinction to be made between change within a context, which happens constantly, and change of context, which happens rarely. I offer that we are currently living through the later—a global process of massive change, not only in the global systems that create the material context of our lives, but even more significantly, in the structure of how we unconsciously process and structure our perception of the world. Significantly for our purposes as educators, this later level of change tends to play out along generational lines. Of course, it is difficult to tap into the depth of this level with conscious awareness because conscious awareness is an extension of the same cognitive structures we would be endeavoring to become aware of. It is like trying to see your own eyes with your own eyes—at best, you can only observe a reflection of them. (There is a refined quality of awareness, described in Buddhist philosophy as “emptiness,” in Zen as “no-mind,” and in Hinduism as “the witness” that, arguably, could do so, but that is another line of inquiry.)

Now the most significant aspect for our purposes of the massive process of the change of context we are undergoing is that our institutions and our leaders are losing credibility and authority. I don’t think it is possible to overstate the significance of this. Now when institutions lose authority, they do not thereby automatically cease to function. They continue to operate, but differently: coercion implemented by force begins to replace cooperation nurtured by consensus. As a result of this process, the entire structure of authority in our society—and by extension, within academia—has transformed in recent decades, morphing from a system grounded in an ethical vision of internally generated order based on individual responsibility and a willingness to trust people to an increasingly ideologically based authoritarian system that, having lost this ground and abandoned this vision, no longer trusts people. It then attempts to impose order on them by external means, primarily by using fear and threats of punishment. With all due respect to the character and integrity of those I am disagreeing with here, part of what troubles me about the ready acceptance of the “obviousness” of the statement is that it can be interpreted as a pointer reflecting this dark transition from cooperation to coercion.

As a student of the past, it saddens me to see a generation without much curiosity to learn about the past, but as a chronicler of the present, I can understand why. The entirety of our past, the sum total of all of our politics, literature, philosophy, science, government, and business, has led to the current situation—and looked at from a young person’s point of view, the current situation does not present a pretty picture. Massive personal debt, a collapsing economy, pointless wars, legitimizing of torture, increasing authoritarianism, environmental degradation, unrestrained government snooping, and incredible levels of personal anxiety—this is a state of affairs to abandon and move away from, not one to embrace.

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Now with this national and global big picture as the context of our lives, how should teachers act in the classroom? One way is to be tough and refuse to make any exceptions to rules they have made up—even when they are tempted to do so to serve the student. Clearly this answer is hugely appealing because in times of radical uncertainty and high anxiety, people are consoled by (and often actively seek out) dogmatic expressions of certainty, however bogus. This also means that even though a majority of students will grumble about being treated this way, few of them will oppose in principle the authoritarian patterns being used in the treatment. Even worse, many of them will be inclined—as the statement correctly points out—to interpret the caring, adaptable teacher as a soft mark.

But there is more involved here than just that point. In order to clarify, let me take a moment to examine what Aristotle would have called the “soul” (i.e. interior dimension) of our students. I acknowledge that we seem to do this already with our research into the “millennial generation.” However, by the very nature of the methodology we use, the sorts of things we say about the millennial generation are based almost entirely on empirically verifiable and thus external observations that, as a result, are necessarily superficial. Since claims about the interior dimension cannot be empirically verified, there is little attempt to penetrate the interior depths of the life of the students other than asking questions of them which, as post-Freudians, we know can provide unreliable responses in all except the expression of consumer preferences.

Once again, Aristotle can help us here.

Aristotle says that the greatest good in life is friendship, and he identifies three levels of friendship—friendships of convenience, where we have warm, pleasing interactions with those life throws us together with; friendships of pleasure, where we gather with others specifically to do the things we enjoy; and friendships of soul, where we join with another on the deepest possible interior level because we embrace, share, and support, if you will, the spiritual project of our soul friend. Aristotle further says that the highest expression of a soul friendship is when such friends come together to seek out the truth of things (theoretical wisdom) or to create social justice (practical wisdom).

Now speaking generally, if we look at how friendship is modeled in pop culture, we see something quite superficial. The dominant media image of friendships are of the sort Aristotle would call friendships of pleasure, but qualified by “cool” and somewhat detached modes of interacting in which we are required to promote ourselves and our interests in order to gain recognition, acceptance, and approval. Even when we do this with success—and to a large degree schooling models just this sort of “professional” relationship—the result is, as Aristotle so presciently cognized, a great feeling of emptiness in the depths of a person’s interior.

This dynamic is especially active in young people, who do not have much in the way of role models or a culturally provided alternative understanding to support the cultivation and development of friendships of soul, which Aristotle identifies as a blossom of virtue and part of the substance of happiness. Instead, almost all of available images of social life are constituted by the two lesser modes of Aristotelian friendship—relationships of pleasure and relationships of convenience. I am suggesting that while the student/teacher relationship is not likely ever to reach the highest level of an actual soul friendship, it should at least provide a minimum of

authentic soul caring and not be subsumed entirely under the market model of competing interests in competition. The notion of Platonic love, involving a deep soul caring that is not as an expression of Eros, touches on this concept.

So how can we best serve students today? Certainly it is going to take a lot of the “old wine” of love, inspiration, and respect—but also plenty of “new wineskins.” That is, we need to love, inspire, and respect students in new ways, bringing compassion, care, and understanding to them as we try to understand their challenges, fears, and in some cases, despair. In this area the “Most Important Thing” is not how consistently strict we are or how much our students fear us—and and many now confuse fear with respect. It is whether we have made ourselves as fully available as possible (meaning “from our own depths” and not necessarily “with lots of our time”). As part of this, we need to clarify to ourselves that the policy statements on our syllabi are for our students, not our students for the policy statements. In this light, it seems not only unobjectionable but admirable that we would on principle be willing to make adjustments and exceptions to our policies.

Be that as it may, I anticipate in the near future there will be a dramatic increase in student grumbling, dissatisfaction, passive resistance, anger, overt rejection of authority, and acting out. If so, then the tough and uncompromising attitude and behavior the statement recommends will be even more out of phase and inadequate. I concede, however, that the posture the statement recommends is not entirely mistaken. To clarify, let me bring moral development theory into the discussion.

Moral development theory—and I am here referencing the larger insight that moral growth and development occurs in a sequence of stages and not necessarily any of the specific details of what individual theorists like Piaget, Kohlberg, or Gilligan have to say—claims that morality is more like playing piano than being pregnant. That is, while at any given moment, a woman is either pregnant or not, morality is more like playing the piano in that there are different levels of competence. Knowing a person plays the piano is not as informative as knowing how well they play. Of course, there is a lively and ongoing debate about the details of moral development and to what extent it is culturally specific, but the developmental process is generally divided into three primary stages—pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional.

In the pre-conventional stage people are out for themselves and do not submit to moral authority but only to superior power. This is the stage of “might makes right.” Here the uncompromising application of strict rules makes sense and is likely to be effective with students at this level of moral development. What troubles me about the policy promoted by the statement is not that it will always prove to be ineffective. It won’t. What troubles me is that the statement reduces all teacher/student interactions to the lowest level of moral development. In so far as we do this, however, we mirror a larger pattern in our society that responds to collapse by promoting one of the main mechanisms of it.

In the conventional stage there is more recognition of how systems and people interact by rewarding obedience and punishing disobedience. On the conventional level people “do the right thing” without being forced—not because it is right but because doing so will be rewarded within the system. This is the level of conformity and obedience. Now the policies

recommended in the statement are not destructive to students on this level, who are the majority. Such students are able to garner some sense of satisfaction from not violating the rules, and it does not bother them if the rules are arbitrary or even unjust as long as they are applied consistently and they are able to count on getting rewards for being obedient. Ken Wilber refers to this conventional level of moral development as the “Nazi level.” His point is that people on this level do their job within the system without questioning the system.

Now while authoritarian policies often please those on the conventional level, we in the university should be aspiring after excellence, not obedience and conformity. One hears a lot of talk about maintaining high standards, but almost always, what is meant by “high standards” is giving hard exams and not making exceptions to rules. This is a superficial and even vulgar notion of excellence. As Aristotle would clarify for us, to maintain high standards means to model, cultivate, and encourage the flourishing of excellence, not to enforce obedient conformity to convention.

And this brings us to the crux of what troubles me about the strict adherence to pre-formulated rules advocated in the statement: it is that whatever damage is brought about by the application of this policy will occur primarily among those on the highest level of moral development, the post-conventional stage. This is the stage we should be cultivating, nurturing, modeling, and expanding, the stage of the highest human flourishing, of Aristotelian excellence. Here people do what is right because it is right, independently of rewards or reputation. In a learning context, people on the highest level follow their curiosity and engage in learning independently of rewards and punishments. And to such a person, a teacher who not only fails to make an appropriate adjustment or exception but who refuses to do so on principle—this person is likely to come across as being mired on a lower level, either from a lack of personal development or from an unseemly fixation on those who are. Either way, there is an abandonment of high standards, not the maintenance of them.

In this context, Aristotle once again has something helpful to say. Aristotle says that excellence—which in moral development terms means being on the higher, post-conventional level—is both a revelation of human nature and the true measure of human accomplishment. He clarifies that human nature is not revealed by averaging out the behavior of masses of people but rather by attending closely to those who cultivate and manifest excellence. Given this, the problem with any sort of authoritarianism in higher learning is that by bringing force, fear, and even coercion into an environment of learning, it betrays high standards of excellence even as it presents itself as their defender.

Of course, in dealing with a student one knows to be on a lower level of moral development, it may well be best in that instance to refuse to make any exceptions or adjustments. But the policy the statement recommends does not discriminate between an honest truth seeker and a moral reptile—in its indiscriminating application, all are treated as scrounging lizards. By thus rationalizing a retreat from high standards even while pretending to uphold them, the statement replicates a tragic process playing out on the national level as our country degrades itself and its institutions under the banner of taking bold steps to defend its moral principles and standards.

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With this as context, let me now turn to the statement itself. I am going to go through it line by line in order to register a different way of looking at each of the things it says.

“Making exceptions to your own policy statements does three things. First, it opens you up to claims of unfairness.”

The truth of this claim depends, of course, on which level of moral development we are talking about. To those on the higher level of moral development—which is the level I think we in the university should be trying to model and promote—being willing to make exceptions to your own policy statements will show that you care and are willing to serve, not that you are arbitrary and unfair. If students take advantage of this willingness, that is unwise on their part—not because they will get punished, but because they are violating and dishonoring their own higher potentials. What I am saying is not without its own problems, to be sure, but when we act on the basis of what we so frequently say we believe—that knowledge and understanding are intrinsically important and that one only cheats oneself when one cheats—we would not make preventing this sort of thing our primary concern. We would be able to trust that even when students takes advantage of the system, at least some of those students will eventually—and partly because of this experience—evolve morally.

“What makes one person's excuse more valid than another's?”

I take this as a rhetorical question. However, let's make it an actual question. Interestingly, as an actual question, it has an answer. That answer is this: what makes one person's excuse more valid than another's is whether it IS more valid! As Aristotle would hasten to point out, part of what it means to be a developed person is to have the ability to make determinations like this, accurately gauging the relative validity of excuses. Unfortunately, the premise of the above statement is that the personal judgment of the teacher cannot be relied upon to discriminate between valid and invalid excuses. The operational result is that either ALL excuses accepted as valid or NONE of them are. Now while this meshes with a troubling anti-humanist trend in our culture that substitutes unvarying rules and strict procedural protocols for the potential of an evolved human capacity to make wise judgments, it also betrays the classical vision of human potential.

“Second, it damages your own credibility with your students. Instead of being the professor, you become known as a push-over, and no one respects a push-over.”

As I conceded above, this damage does happen—but primarily with the most un-evolved students. However, I think it is not only wrong but a betrayal of our mission to take the likely response of the most un-evolved students as being revelatory of all students. Among the more evolved students, a teacher's willingness to serve the enterprise of learning by making exceptions will build that teacher's credibility, not damage it. But for all students it will also model a valuable lesson in life—the willingness to take a risk to adapt law, theory, and systems to conditions on the ground. As Aristotle might say, in an institution devoted to the cultivation of excellence, it is appropriate to try to raise the lower up to the level of the higher and not to limit the higher to the level of the lower.

Once again, there are indeed students who will take advantage of you and even lose respect for you if you show a willingness to make exceptions to your own policies. But there is a larger issue here. Modeling advanced behavior is part of what “higher education” is all about. And we obviously have not perfected our systems and decision making protocols to the degree to where we can now abandon human judgment. In addition, being willing to bear the disrespect of less evolved students in the manner of what Aristotle refers to as a “great person” is more likely in the long run to help them to evolve and develop than merely exercising authoritarian force over them ever will. In a moral sense, this is the proverbial teaching hungry people how to fish rather than giving them already caught fish to eat. Indeed, our world desperately needs more so-called pushovers to help to humanize our procedures and systems, especially in this time of crisis and collapse.

“Tied to that, third, it undermines your authority in your own classroom. After all, if YOU don't even bother to follow YOUR OWN policies, why should anyone else?”

Again, I think it is simply wrong to suggest that reaching out to accommodate students will always and only serve to undermine one's classroom authority. But there is another point to be made about the danger of undermining one's authority. That is, there is not much authority left to undermine. In fact, what we today call “authority” in the classroom is actually more accurately described as the threat of “force.” And as Aristotle points out, true authority, which is rare, is always more than the mere threat of force, which is common. Indeed, unless the force behind a command is mated with a vision of goodness rooted in the common good, then it will have more of the quality of brutality than of authority. Sadly, public officials in our society, from policeman to president, are losing authority even as they gain in force—which, interestingly, is one of the fundamental indicators of social crisis.

Now to make a difference in this context involves modeling an alternative to the mere use of force by authorities. In the classroom this means that one's ultimate policy should never be simply to uphold the rules on the syllabus, which even at their best are merely instrumental and vary from teacher to teacher. A teacher's ultimate policy should be to serve the student with total commitment. It is essential to understand that the teacher's authority comes from that commitment, not from whatever force is used to implement it.

“...[In addition] earning a zero for failing to follow directions is a valuable lesson.”

To me, this is the most objectionable part of the entire statement. The notion that it teaches a “valuable lesson” when “earning a zero for failing to follow directions” is patronizing in the extreme. One wonders who is going to give all the adults a “lesson” in how not to debase a planet with greed based economics, ruin a nation with special interest politics, and degrade the media into a propaganda tool for the corporate interests that own them. But worse than that, let's consider just what this so-called “valuable lesson” is? As we stand at the precise historical moment when we need intelligent and thoughtful distance from the status quo in order to reform it, the “valuable lesson” this statement seems to be promoting is the authoritarian lesson of obedience to the status quo.

“Indeed, only a person who cares about students will have the courage to teach them such valuable lessons in life....”

Of course, one must ask here just what “valuable lessons in life” are taught by sticking to a syllabus no matter what. After all, the rules on a syllabus are not natural law. They are entirely made up—presumably in the students’ interest. So is it a “valuable lesson in life” to teach unreasoning obedience to rules, especially when, as is being so dramatically revealed in our time, the rule of law has become too much an artifact of power and not enough, as Aristotle would have it, an expression of reason intended to serve the common good. Is it a “valuable lesson” to teach radical obedience to the status quo—even as the status quo is collapsing under the combined weight of its many flaws, falsehoods, and devious manipulations?

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In conclusion, I accept without qualification the noble intentions and love for students shared by those who support the recommendations promoted by the statement. However, in the spirit of those intentions and that love, I think there are better recommendations available. The process of finding them would begin by reconsidering what it means to love our students in the context of a world in which the ruling order of ideas and assumptions have been corrupted, morally compromised, and are collapsing. Certainly we do not want to be calling for blanket obedience to a corrupt and compromised status quo. Advocating policies predicated on the assumption that the rules must be obeyed is simply the wrong message for our time. Instead, we need to nurture visions of a more just, sane, and satisfying ways of living, the implementation of which, of course, requires challenging the status quo. And where better to model the ideal society than in a classroom. Indeed, the real lesson of our day is to learn to challenge the status quo with civility, decency, and respect. And this is why it is so critical that teachers be willing to adapt and adjust (with decency and respect) the “status quo” of their classrooms in order better to accommodate the requests and appeals of their students. By doing so they will be able to model for a generation inheriting a deeply contaminated, morally compromised, and collapsing moral order how best to respond to that sad and tragic global state of affairs.

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In the right order of things, people come before profits and students come before pedagogy, not the other way around. On the national and global level, it is essential to find a way to put people before profits. And in a parallel process, it is essential in our institutions of higher learning that we find a way to elevate students above pedagogy, thereby allowing pedagogy to serve students and not the other way around.

I look forward to sharing ideas with all of you about how to do this.
You may respond to Dr. Bardi at jfb9@psu.edu.