

# Risky Receptivity in the Time of Trump: The Political Significance of Ethical Formation

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## INTRODUCTION

In the midst of the current political crisis, no student committed to social justice wants to be accused of “just talking about it.” Concrete action is what matters. Even worse than limiting one’s political engagement to discussion would be to focus on one’s own ethical formation. Critiques of those who turn their attention to the cultivation of their inner lives can be scathing. One need only think of a common satiric trope: the beautiful, vapid practitioner of yoga, whose spiritual pursuit is nothing but self-serving. Even in a society devoted to authentic self-expression, self-formation is suspicious to the public-minded citizen. According to the common sense of contemporary progressive politics, meaningful change is always systemic and structural. It also must be self-consciously political. To depoliticize any act risks cloaking the power operations at work.

Given these premises, many students are suspicious of calls to engage in dialogue for the sake of mutual understanding. Undergraduates in the course I teach on human rights, for example, usually reason that dialogue is only of value if its participants aim at concrete political change. “Deliberation,” consisting of argumentation regarding a decision or principle, is somewhat less suspect due to its tendency to directly address politics. But here too many students side with critics, such as Chantal Mouffe, who allege that such exchanges are more likely to cloak and legitimize power than to disrupt it.<sup>1</sup> Better to take to the streets or use the law to fight for one’s principles.

Other democratic theorists have been more forgiving in regard to the public benefits of discursive exchange. John Dewey argued that it can help diverse citizens to form collective aims, as well as improve each person’s judgment

through consideration of others' arguments, making people better at solving public problems.<sup>2</sup> More recent deliberative theorists such as Danielle Allen have especially emphasized the potential for "talking to strangers" to make citizens willing to sacrifice for each other.<sup>3</sup>

But rarely is there sustained consideration of the inner work necessary to bring these goods to fruition, the philosophical foundations that inspire such work, and the education that is formative of both. I argue that practices of self-cultivation can produce key democratic goods. Moreover, while it is certainly not the only means, I show how a certain kind of Christian evangelical education can encourage practices of self-formation that make these goods possible.

I draw from interviews with evangelical and secular students who participated in deliberative dialogue with each other on "politics in the age of Trump." Occurring shortly after Trump's inauguration, the dialogue brought together students from Cairn University, an evangelical Christian school, and the University of Pennsylvania. Students attended who had voted for Trump or Clinton, as well as students who voted third party or chose not to vote. I interviewed twenty-one students, including thirteen from Cairn. I focus here on my interviews with Cairn students and how their practices of ethical self-formation allowed for a receptivity that was especially noteworthy given the polarization of the country.

This inquiry is grounded in recent work in the philosophy of education that draws on empirical research.<sup>4</sup> I draw on fieldwork to respond to the normative question of whether and how a focus on ethical formation should be considered socially and politically significant. I also examine how students' philosophical beliefs may be shaped by education and in turn may inform their desire to learn. In particular, I focus on how a particular kind of evangelical education is formative for students' inner lives and suggest how this ethical orientation makes it possible for these students to learn in dialogue.

### *Ethical Formation*

The concept of "ethical formation" could denote anything that culti-

vates a sense of what is good. Often though, what is discussed is not merely formation but ethical “self-formation.” This nomenclature implies that ethics is rooted in work on the self, rather than weighing consequences or following rules. This suggests an orientation to the tradition referred to as “virtue ethics” in contrast to utilitarian and deontological positions.<sup>5</sup>

Yet an extensive literature developed by Michel Foucault understands any moral orientation as involving self-formation, not only those that are based in the idea of virtue. “Self-formation,” Foucault explains:

[is] a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself.<sup>6</sup>

In this interpretation, any conception of the good involves the cultivation of a particular kind of self, regardless of whether the morality is self-consciously focused on consequences, rules, or virtue. I use the concept of self-formation in both the sense of an ethics oriented toward the cultivation of virtue (in this case, Christian virtue), and in the sense Foucault articulated to indicate work done to shape the self.

Theorists have built on this latter conception by studying how people in diverse traditions engage in work on the self. Recently scholars have focused on the nature of agency in this process, such as whether and how submission to an ethics should be understood as an exercise of freedom.<sup>7</sup>

But a small number of scholars are beginning to question this emphasis on agency. Regardless of whether it is an act of freedom, the concept of self-formation indicates that one is acting upon oneself. Yet central to the understanding of many so-called ethical “agents” is an orientation to something beyond the self and the claim that it is not the individual effecting the transformation. The anthropologist China Scherz has documented how Catholic nuns in Uganda understand themselves as laying the groundwork for the formation of ethical

selves but believe that it is God who brings about change. Scherz suggests that the nuns' capacity to open themselves to something beyond the will is crucial to understanding their actions.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I argue that these evangelical Christian students' understanding of God as acting upon them makes possible a form of receptivity that is beneficial for democracy. I argue further that this understanding and its attendant practices have been cultivated by a form of evangelical education that is practiced at the university these students attend. Evangelical Christianity is often viewed as a rigid belief system whose adherents hope only to convert others. This university, however, makes receptivity to others a central educational aim, and their students' responses to dialogue reflect this ideal. Moreover, while students may harbor the long-term aim of converting the people they meet, they believe that the means to change another person is to first understand and love them. I argue that this orientation produces a key democratic good: citizens who wish to remain in relationship with and learn from people they oppose politically.

Abating suspicions that a focus on inner-work risks valorizing the individual above social and political problems, the foregoing reveals the close relationship between who one is and what one does. It exemplifies how work on the self, particularly the cultivation of virtues understood as their own goods rather than as means to ends, can be crucial to desired social and political outcomes.

First, I discuss the self-formative aspirations with which many evangelical students approached the dialogue. I then provide examples of how they applied these aspirations to their practices during the dialogue. Next, I address the ethical and political significance of this inner work. I conclude with a discussion of how these self-formative practices were supported by an evangelical education.

### A CASE STUDY

I focus on one student, whom I call Barbara, in order to show the connections between her aspirations, practices of ethical formation, and responses to dialogue. Given the limitations of space, for this article it is better to reveal

such depth than show breadth in many examples. I chose Barbara because she is especially articulate, but also because she is similar to her classmates in her aspirations for the dialogue. While Cairn students expressed diverse aims and responses, the majority echo her desire to cultivate Christian virtues, defined primarily as humility and the formation of loving relationships, and engaged in practices of self-formation to live out these ideals in the dialogue.

Like several of her classmates, Barbara explained that she came to the dialogue for no less of a reason than to imitate Jesus Christ:

As Christians we believe that we're called to love everyone and serve people no matter who they are, and by our love, it shows them Christ. Not to just say hey, you need to follow Christ. But just by serving them ... Because when Christ was on earth he served others ... He spent his time with tax collectors, which at that time was a pretty bad person to be, and prostitutes, and constantly stuck up for women and did all these controversial things. I guess that's why I wanted to go [to the dialogue] ... So, I don't have a closed mind.

Initially this explanation may seem troubling, even offensive. Does Barbara see UPenn students as akin to prostitutes, and is she merely stooping to their level in order to proselytize? She closes though by rooting all of this in forming not others but rather *herself* in the image of Christ: I went to the dialogue, she says, "so I don't have a closed mind."

Should she be believed? I asked Barbara to explain the value of trying to understand different perspectives rather than fighting for what she believes. I quote her response at length for the multiple dimensions it reveals:

Because we're all human and I think some people confuse Christianity with a reason to be ... self-righteous. But I use it as a reason to be the same as everyone else. You realize that being a sinful human is really, really hard and living on the planet is really hard and we go through the same things everyone else goes through. I am not a Christian because I

want to be better [than other people]. I just realized that I need the creator that's bigger than me, that created me, and that just loves me. Because being sinful sucks but you know there is always hope and you know there is always grace at the end of the day and that life is worth living. But I feel like we can still all agree that life is really hard.

And it just brings compassion to know other people. If you are always in your bubble, of course, you are going to fight for what you think is right because that's all you know. But when you get to know other people, you have compassion for them, and you stop being so self-righteous and you realize that there's more than you and there is. There is so much more than just us.... If you really want to follow Jesus, you have to love and serve [others] and you can't do that with claiming that you are right all the time. You have to be humble.

... I'm so confident in what I believe that I don't have to be afraid of other people, you know what I mean? I don't have to be afraid of their opinions because I believe that Jesus is the only way and he empowers me to love others ...

Also, God is such a mighty God, we don't have to defend him. He can defend himself. And he can use me however he chooses and I'm open to that. And right now, I just feel like he's saying, "get to know people, love them."

I feel like growing up I was taught to stay away from bad people. [My parents] want me to be safe and they don't want me to turn away from being a Christian. But once I was strong in my faith I felt like ... I can hang out with other people and not feel swayed by their opinions ...

... The bible talks about how this place is not our home. It's temporary ... We just live in a fallen world ... There is no making America great. This is just what it is. If you're living

for God, you're living for what is to come and for Him and what He wants and the eternal ... So you're not trying to save this world. We should just be serving others.

Barbara's monologue is revealing. First, her emphasis throughout is on *who she can be in relation to others*. Self-formation is about her own intentions and actions, but it is also deeply relational. Second, she understands her self-formative aims as rooted in her religious beliefs, and her understanding of her religion leads her to prize humility, compassion, and service. All three of these together guide her to be open to people she encounters.

Third, her receptivity, grounded as it is in her religious understanding, is premised on the idea that she need not do all the work herself. God is "so great that [she] does not need to defend him"; on the contrary, God can *use her* however he chooses. This orientation is reiterated later on, when she notes that she is not required to fix the fallen world. "This place is not our home," she notes, and she is not trying to save it. Instead, she says later in our interview, she hopes not to find a solution but to "*be a light*." This sense that she does not need to identify the solution to problems and then engineer desired outcomes seems to free her to be available to the people around her.

This capacity for receptivity contains what may initially seem to be an irony. It is her certainty that allows for her humility. She does not need to be afraid of others, because her faith is strong enough that it will not be shaken by their views. But this very faith directs her to meet with humility many other aspects of life. The strong ground on which she stands allows for a softening in other areas.

This orientation seems to shape quite powerfully her response to the dialogue. When I asked her about her experience, she began by recounting that she had sat with an older UPenn student who had been a teacher. When he told the group that he is gay, Barbara was excited that "we had that diversity." When I asked her to identify the most meaningful moment in the forum, it was the fact he seemed comfortable with her.

But was this desire for relationship merely a means to an end, a desire

for him to feel comfortable so that she could win him over to her conception of truth? Barbara's words suggest that it was not. Instead, she practices the humility she lauds, reflecting on Christian views of homosexuality:

Honestly, I'm not God so I really don't know what happens ... I don't know if it is the kind of thing that stops you from going to heaven or not. I mean if it is a sin like every other sin, I sin all the time and I'm pretty sure that I'm still going to heaven because I work on it ... It's not a black and white thing to me and I don't think that telling this man that we don't even know that what he is doing is wrong would do anything. I feel like it would just drive him away even further from anything about us.

Once again, her response raises the question of whether this willingness to withhold judgment is strategic: he would be driven away and then be less persuadable. But much of what she expresses regards her uncertainty about whether homosexuality is in fact a sin, and moreover, her certainty that if it is, it is no different from her own sinfulness. Her aim is not so much to persuade him to change as to remain in relationship with him.

But what does all of this humility and relationship-building mean for the broader implications of dialogue? Perhaps it makes Barbara a better person, but does it make a better world? Barbara and her classmates tend not to worry about this, secure that God will work through them if they aspire to be good people. What might a secular analysis make of the implications of their aspirations?

### *Consequences of Non-Consequentialism*

The inner work Barbara performs in dialogue to remain humble and receptive sets her up to learn. Rather than only learn *about* the UPenn student in order to more effectively evangelize him, she learns *from* him. In fact, when I ask her from whom she learned in the dialogue, it is this man she remembers. She explains that she only heard good things about George W. Bush from her parents. But this man is old enough to have been an adult during that presidency

and as such, Barbara guesses, has better judgment on it than she does. So she was fascinated by his views on Bush.

She also learns from her fellow Cairn students. She recalls a student who explained that he voted for an independent candidate because he could not stand before God having voted for Clinton or Trump. Yet another Cairn student voted for Trump because he did not think it appropriate to hold a non-Christian to his own ethical standards. Reflecting on these different views, Barbara remembers realizing, “Wow, they are both true.” She then continued to explain her reasoning as she wrestled with the different dimensions of both arguments.

This suggests two capacities that have been sorely missing from contemporary politics. First is the ability to learn from those whose political views conflict with our own. Barbara could not bring herself to vote for either Clinton or Trump; both candidates were to her mind unethical. But she does not see Clinton or Trump *voters* as unethical: she learns from the UPenn student who voted for Clinton, as well as the Cairn student who voted for Trump.

Second, she is able to hold competing truths in her mind without rushing to a resolution. The insight that “they are both true” is not followed by an immediate need to resolve the contradiction. Rather, she is able to delve more deeply and continue to dwell in the uncertainty it engenders.

This capacity seems to be supported by a particular kind of Christian epistemology. A certainty about God may allow her to soften in her assuredness in other areas. She need not guard against being “pulled up short” if it happens, then God is doing it.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, because God is so great, she need not defend him nor solve the world’s problems. This seems to free her to not know and to open to what and who she encounters.

The dispositions Barbara and her peers cultivate – to meet with humility and learn from those who differ from themselves – have been noticeably absent from contemporary politics. Such an orientation would not erase principled differences. But it may help cultivate the democratic goods theorists imagine can result from such exchange: the willingness to work toward the good of diverse others, and an improved capacity for reflection and problem-solving borne of

an understanding-oriented conversation.

### PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION, ETHICAL FORMATION, AND POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

These evangelical students understand God as bringing about the changes that matter. This frees them from the need to engineer outcomes; instead, their responsibility is to act ethically, and God will work through them to affect the results. Hence they tend to view dialogue as an exercise in self-formation: they want to be a certain kind of person during the dialogue.

The secular liberal students I interviewed want this too. They aspire to open-mindedness and understanding, as well as hope that the practice of dialogue will make them better people. But they worry that these aims are irresponsible given the political emergency in which they live. These politically-minded students tend to see social progress as dependent upon their own efforts. In this view, responsible citizens identify desirable social outcomes and attempt to engineer them. This focus on outcomes inspires crucial political and legal work to address many forms of inequality and violence. But it can also inadvertently lead to the sense that the persons we encounter are valuable to the extent that they help us attain those goals. In dialogue with someone who opposes me, what matters is whether by the end of the conversation their vote will support my principles. Many of the secular students I interviewed then feared: If they focus on developing good relationships with Trump voters, where does this leave the dangerous condition of actual politics?

The evangelical students are freed from this worry and hence the need to extract any outcome from their interlocutors. Evangelicals' faith in God means that they need not evangelize. And in a further counter-intuitive move, this lack of instrumentality allows the interactions to produce valuable social and political goods.

It is not inevitable that an evangelical Christian orientation would cultivate these dispositions. It is uncertain whether students from Liberty University, with its explicit political identity, would demonstrate the same qualities. And it

is something of a truism that co-religionists can be as diverse in their characters as those with whom they share no formal affiliation.

Though their early life no doubt played some role, moreover, it also seems unlikely that these students all happened to have similar parents. Barbara, for example, in the passage above makes a point of noting that this way of living breaks with her upbringing.

But woven throughout the Cairn curriculum is the intentional formation of Christians who can love and respect others, hold their commitments with humility, and dwell in uncertainty. These aims are rooted in curricular practices: from the beginning students are instructed in the art of listening and in how to relate to their fellow students. Some professors even suggest to students that they take notes not only on what teachers say, but also on what their peers express. Such activities are meant to send a message: Everyone deserves your careful attention.

Course content is also structured around this aim. All students take a class entitled “The Integrated Life.” The importance of this class is revealed by who teaches it: in addition to a full-time faculty member whose own work focuses on dialogic practices, the class is taught by the Dean of Arts and Sciences and the Provost. It is intended to be formative of who these students will be at Cairn and thereafter.

Humility and the capacity for uncertainty are key aims of the course. The dean explains: “We want the students to be comfortable being wrong because unless we are wrong, we cannot learn.” A professor explains, “Our mission statement has a lot of pre-suppositional beliefs about truth.” The goal of the class then is to help students understand “how to believe those things with humility.” He notes that while, “Education tends to teach risk aversion,” this class aims to get students “comfortable with failure.”

This learning is also relational. The dean explains: “We walk them through a process of asking them to consider their relationships in light of what they believe to be true ... This asks them to consider what their theological beliefs about relationships are and then trace them to actual behaviors.” Students are

taught to consider their ethics as based in how they are with others, and class activities make this idea concrete.

This is not to suggest that their collegiate aims can wholly account for students' behavior. None of the Cairn faculty claim as much. But it is suggestive of how the intentional orientation of a Christian school, with its explicit mission to cultivate virtue and its relative freedom from the compulsion to prove its usefulness in market-oriented terms, can be formative for students. These students' receptivity and capacity to learn from their political adversaries suggests furthermore what might be the broader social and even political significance of such cultivation.

This is also not to suggest that Cairn students have no desire to influence their secular counterparts. Cairn's provost noted that many students have likely been on missionary trips overseas and would have experience speaking with people with different religious beliefs. They would have learned from this experience, he suggested, that one must listen before telling.

Does this mean that Cairn students are covertly instrumental in their approach? If they are, then they believe that desirable outcomes can only arise from a commitment to ethical relationship. They know they cannot directly pursue the goal of persuading the other side. What they must do is be good people in good relationships and hope that the right thing happens as a result.

Whether their patience will bear fruit is unknown: perhaps over the months ahead some secular students might reconsider their relationship with God as a result of speaking with these religious students. But what is clear is that when Cairn students show up with the intentions of their own ethical development, they are able to learn from people who might otherwise be viewed as enemies or at least as deeply mistaken.

This reveals how ethical self-formation can be productive of social and political goods that often seem impossible in the contemporary political environment. Moreover, the particular formation oriented toward allowing God to work through one, rather than believing that the work must be done oneself, seems particularly powerful as a means to support these goods.

It is by no means always appropriate: many situations call for carefully planned work, explicit political action, and the intentional mitigation of structural and systemic problems. Moreover, as I explore elsewhere, there are other factors that may promote Cairn students learning during the dialogue.<sup>10</sup> And the tension between cultivating relationships and pursuing political objectives does not entirely disappear due to these students' conceptions of how the world works. Yet the foregoing nonetheless suggests nonetheless the wisdom in the evangelical insight that at least in some circumstances, in order to be instrumental, one must first become an instrument.

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1 Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?," *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745-758.

2 John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State Press, [1927] 2012); John Dewey, "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," in *Later Works of John Dewey* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1939/1988), 227-233.

3 Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Iris Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

4 e.g., David Hansen, Jason Thomas Wozniak, and Ana Cecilia Galindo Diego, "Fusing Philosophy and Fieldwork in a Study of Being a Person in the World: An Interim Commentary," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (2015): 159-170.

5 Gregory Trianosky, "What Is Virtue Ethics All About?," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27, no. 4, (1990): 335-344.

6 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2012).

7 James Laidlaw, *The Subject of Virtue: An Anthropology of Ethics and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

8 China Scherz, "Enduring the Awkward Embrace: Personhood and Ethical Work in a Ugandan Convent," under review.

9 Deborah Kerdeman draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer to describe this self-unsettling. "Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 293-308.

10 Rachel Wahl, "Learning and Inequality in Dialogue," in preparation.