

Professor F's Norms of Dialogue

It is important to keep in mind that in this classroom you are not merely absorbing facts. We live in a world where information is cheap and easily accessible, and what matters more than knowing about things is knowing what to do with the information you are acquiring (and, hopefully, to start seeing the world in terms of possibility rather than in terms of things). Though it is true that the content in this course is directly related to a certain critical awakening, it is still just content that can be deployed in various ways depending on your goals—that is, depending on what problem you are working on. For example, we see the unethical deployment of critical content all the time with predatory actors nominally aligning themselves as activists against the current “-ism” that is receiving attention in order to aggrandize themselves in various ways. Thus, a key component of this class is that you also reflect on and work to transform yourself in relation to the content we are engaging so that you might realize a more ethical world relation and also be prepared to protect yourself from the predators around us.

With that said, you, as an individual ego, are not the focus of this course. Rather, the focus is on how we all fail each other, all the time, by treating each other as objects that are merely a means to our own ends; and, the work we will begin—a labor that you must continue well beyond your time in this classroom and at this college—will be toward the end of challenging the hyper individualist notion you have of yourself and recalibrating your habits/practices with an awareness of and sensitivity toward the needs and demands of our life-world. In a sense, you will be unlearning and relearning yourself.

There are specific objectified norms that we will focus on—racism, sexism, classism—but please note that there are various ways that we objectify each other all of the time that do not have a robust and active academic discourse dedicated to their analysis and dismantling. The content of this class is focused on how we objectify and also on alternative ways of engaging such that we can resist objectification and thus violence. We will engage the material as follows (and, within this are the norms of dialogue that I expect you to agree with before continuing on in this class):

- 1) You will do your best to understand the assigned readings before class.
- 2) You will come with at least two questions about the material to discuss in class.
- 3) After I offer some general introductory commentary that situates the reading, specifically focusing on why I find it useful, we will then engage in a discussion.
- 4) Our discussions will be constrained and thus enacted through the following expectations:
 - a. *Ad Hominem is not acceptable*; that is, we will not attack our classmates or anyone at the college. Rather, we will focus our deconstructive critique on the content of ideas and the consequences of actions. Hate the sin, not the sinner.
 - i. With this point in mind, I understand that sometimes a space needs to be afforded and maintained where we can vent about certain high-profile actors (i.e. a politician). Though our goal is to avoid ad hominem, it is difficult to do so with persons who are not in a direct relation with us—that is, persons who can only be objects to us because they exist outside of our corporeal relation.
 - b. *We will meet people where they are at, not where we think they should be, and we will work together to reach common goals* (see syllabus). Everyone is arbitrarily

born in a social class that is unfair and rooted in violence, and that violence reproduces itself through the practice/norms of competition. You are not in competition with your classmates and, in fact, in our effort to resist violence we all have a responsibility to understand where our comrades are coming from. In the effort to understand each other...

- c. *If you do not understand something then you are morally obligated to question.* Your obligation is rooted in various facts: you have chosen to be here, as a student, which means you assume certain responsibilities related to inquiry; your responsibility to inquiry is cooperative or grounded in a principle of reciprocity and thus an ethical obligation—that is, others benefit from your presence in the classroom, just as you benefit from the presence of others and so our collective benefit is dependent on everyone being their best. In terms of questioning as such, even if we think we understand something, it is important to question that assumption and the understanding in order to improve. Indeed, my role as professor is at least partly rooted in the demand to repeatedly rearticulate, explain, and thus enhance my own understanding by helping others to also understand. Of course, there are some things that we can never fully understand and that is ok. Also, there will be more questions than answers in this class and that is philosophy. Your questions ought to be formulated with respect to expectations a. and b.
- d. *You are required to offer reasons to support your claims* and you are expected to ask for reasons of others if they make a claim that is unclear or unsupported (i.e. an opinion). Giving and asking for reasons is the basis of rational exchange and it is also the way that we make arguments. Opinions and feelings are a good starting point for reflecting on what you think, but opinions and feelings are not reasons. Your outrage or inherited belief is a signpost, not the endpoint, and beneath those feelings are moral reasons, ones with which I and others will likely agree if they are articulated so that we can talk about them, understand them, and potentially strategize a response.
- e. *The classroom is an open and safe discourse space*, which means everyone is welcome and encouraged to participate. With that said,
 - i. Some of you may not be so keen on speaking in class, which is totally understandable. I ask that you speak with me and, if present, the TA(s) (in person or over skype/zoom, not via email) so that we can find a way for you to participate, and so that your voice can hopefully be included in the discussion.
 - ii. Some of you are all about participating in class discussions, which is also understandable. I ask that you be aware of how much you are talking in relation to the other students in the class. This does not mean that you should not speak, rather, it means that you should be aware of how your speaking is affording or not affording opportunities for others to speak. If I must intervene, then I will ask you to “slow down” which means stop talking and listen for a while. If I ask you to slow down, you should not be ashamed or embarrassed, instead you should think of it as a technical move in a game that is deployed for the purposes of getting other people to play and thus change the experience in new and not yet realized ways.

- f. *This is also a space where speech is free*—a theme we will explore in various ways throughout the term—but, be aware that freedom is always afforded through constraint, and free speech does not mean that anyone has to listen to you or that you will not receive a response in kind. I ask, however, that we treat each other with the sort of respect we would expect to be given to the person(s) or creature(s) we love most.
- g. *Our agreements are open to amendment/addition.*

Covid-19 Amendment

Like most unprecedented moments that have since become normal, the present threshold that we are fumbling across is exciting and terrifying precisely because the other side is still only possible. In other words, the future could be better and it could also be much worse, depending on how things unfold and how we respond through this moment. I share this observation for several reasons: 1) To recognize the collective unease that everyone feels and to emphasize that nobody knows what is going to happen. 2) To emphasize that you are allowed (and encouraged) to talk about the crisis. Most of the material we will work through this term will likely take on a new meaning because of present events so it will be difficult to avoid. And, even though it might be painful or annoying to talk about, because it is all anyone talks about now, hiding from it only makes us complicit in the realization of a possible future that is, at best, unjust. 3) Face-to-face engagement and thus learning are always preferable to online/digital ‘relations,’ but we are lucky to have the technology to continue doing what we want to do despite the mass social-institutional failures that have defined this moment, and we can not only make the best of it but we must make the best of it because the conversations we have in this moment will have implications for that possible future mentioned above. 4) Finally, it is more important now than ever before that we be charitable with each other. Tensions are high, we are on the brink, and communal level support makes or breaks in times of crisis. So, I want to reaffirm the above norms of dialogue and add the following: We are here to support each other, which is a radical act in a world that conquers through division.