

Letter from an Editor

The Amherst College Republicans' response in *The Student* a few weeks ago to the "All Lives Matter" incident said many things—among them, that they "believe many issues raised by Black Lives Matter Awareness Week ought to be addressed" and that Republicans "have been active on issues of police brutality"—but it was silent on one thing: black lives. This silence is telling. For while it concedes that it is a troubling issue that "disproportionately affects individuals of color," and seems to make a move to engage with the issue, it skips over the actual incident that was the cause of the protests and spends three lengthy paragraphs discussing how many prominent Republicans also oppose police militarization.

But this oversight—whether a misunderstanding of the issue, a refusal to listen, or simply a decision to ignore the actual substance of the controversy—is not what should worry us. It is far less distressing that the author of the article missed the heart of the matter, than it is that many more students, though in disagreement, will read the letter and find themselves nodding along, sympathizing with the plight of the silenced and oppressed Republicans.

This sentiment is widely and lightly passed around. Some think perhaps our fellow students have been *unfair* or even *childish* in protesting recent speakers. That perhaps we have an obligation as a community to greet these opinions, and debate them on their terms; an obligation to sit through Patrick Moore's or Dinesh D'Souza's talks to the end, clap respectfully and thank them for coming to our campus. The thought goes: We owe it to ourselves to hear the opposing argument.

I've heard many friends, whose opinions I've always respected, take this position. This is the position, after all, of intellectual openness and integrity: an open-minded willingness to engage even with opposing viewpoints that we passionately disagree with.

But we forget all too often that not all arguments are worth engaging with; that not all conversations are equal in terms of their substance and quality. We forget that as the Amherst community, we should have some standards.

I do not mean that this standard should silence controversial or conservative opinions, or that we shouldn't invite speakers who have said controversial things in the past. I mean only that we as a community must not welcome substandard opinions with open arms. Patrick Moore or Dinesh D'Souza may say what they want, but we don't have to listen. Yes, walking out can be childish when done in ignorance. But when thoroughly considered, to walk out—as both a symbolic expression and a decision to discontinue an unproductive conversation—does not injure our intellectual integrity. On the contrary, it would be precisely *in defense* of our intellectual integrity that we must walk out.

Not all perspectives are equally worth our respect. We all recognize that some arguments are, at best, simply silly. Yet still there's the common misconception that there's always a place for a devil's advocate, no matter how absurd. After all, they start discussions and allow us to fortify and rethink our position. But if a devil's advocate advocates a preposterous view, to say that he is nevertheless necessary to foster debate is to chicken out from real debate. It kindles only uproar. The devil's advocate is a false opponent that allows us to pretend that we engaged with opposing views, and then to live in the illusion that we have thought thoroughly about our position by being open to diverse perspectives. To stand for "intellectual openness" would cease to mean anything. We do not need straw men to tear down; we want real, thoughtful adversaries, who can provoke serious thought and pose real challenges to our beliefs.

Of course, we have to fall back on our judgment to draw the line of what constitutes worthless. This is the danger: We could easily reject an idea as undeserving of our consideration because it seems foreign, thus solidifying our ideological bubble. But this is what scholarship is about: we do not simply throw our judgment out the window and blindly argue with all opinions because we fear that we might be mistaken in our judgment. We should err on the side of caution, but we must exercise our judgment nevertheless. This could mean that we need to sit through a talk even when friends walk out. But more importantly, it means that sometimes, we must refuse speakers the platform to present their opinions as worthy of our respect. This is our individual responsibility, ultimately, and the responsibility of groups bringing in speakers. If the Republicans were serious about conservative ideas, that's what they would do.

Not only this, we also have the responsibility to reject speech that seeks to advance itself at the expense of another group's humanity. This, after all, was the problem—not vandalism and the obstruction of speech, nor the content of the "All Lives Matter" campaign, but the insensitivity and polemical offensiveness of drawing an equivalence between abortion and black lives, between the walk-out of Moore's event and the taking down of "Black Lives Matter" posters. This is not about whether the Westboro Baptist Church has the right to express themselves at funerals; it is about whether they should and whether a community should tolerate it when they do.

This then leads to a third reason why our commitment to debate cannot be absolute: We have a responsibility to act.

But what can we act on, except settled opinion? To act implies the end of thought—as activists say, the "debate is over." I am sure this is what many of us flinch from. Yet despite the uncertainty of meteorological modeling, we still act in face of an approaching storm. The climate change denier's claim is epistemologically sound: We don't really know the future. But the climate change denier stands as the man who refuses to heed an evacuation order when scientists predict, based on models, theories, and solid observations of rising smoke and telltale trembles, that a volcano is about to erupt. Likewise, when we claim that we can't make a judgment on what happened in Ferguson, because we can't really truly ever know what happened between the police officer and Michael Brown, because we can't judge with certainty the police officer's guilt or motivations, we ignore the fact of rampant inequality and the pressing crisis of humanity in our nation and community.

There is today at Amherst College an alarming misconception of the meaning and significance of free discourse, a blind and uncritical exaltation of "discussion." When we as students clutch on to the idea that anything can and therefore must be debated—the idea that there is never place or time for action, insofar as argumentation must never cease—we risk becoming paralyzed, forever mired in thought and debate.

A conversation that denies or undermines the dignity and humanity of our fellow students is a conversation that we may not have. A conversation that so baselessly advances a preposterous and unfounded argument is one that we need not entertain. And a conversation that stands in the way of necessary action, without which the very condition of continued conversation might be undermined, is one we cannot afford to continue. The hurricane is approaching—it is already here—and we must act.

John He '16

Write, Draw, or Edit for *The Indicator*

Send questions, comments,
letters, or submissions to:
theindicator@amherst.edu
or AC #2046

Subscriptions are \$20/semester, \$35/year.
Send checks made out to *The Indicator* to:
The Indicator, Amherst College
AC# 2046, Keefe Campus Center
Amherst, MA 01002-5000

