

IN PRAISE OF IDEOLOGICAL OPENNESS

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One's ideological views – that is, the pattern of positions one tends to take on important public-policy issues – run deep and change little. Inevitably they involve commitments and judgments about the most important things. Just as we value disclosure of vested interests, we value disclosure of one's ideological tendencies. This article elaborates some virtues of ideological openness.

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Many people, some conservatives included, say we need to get ideology out of the college classroom. Some professors say proudly, 'My students never come to know where I stand.'

I practise an opposite approach. I tell students that I am a free-market economist, a classical liberal or libertarian. I am not suggesting that it is wrong to be ideologically reserved. Different styles suit different professors.

And of course some professors go wrong in pressing their ideological judgments and requiring conformity, even forms of activism. But we should not fall into simplistic ideals of neutrality and objectivity. There is an ethical high-ground in temperance, but that does not necessarily mean reserve and circumspection. One can open up about ideology without falling into intemperance.

Here I meditate on some merits of being open about your own ideology, even somewhat outspoken, when teaching a college course.

When listening to testimony on financial regulation, we like to know whether the testifying expert has a vested interest. And we like to know if he has other sorts of commitments that might affect his interpretation and judgment.

An individual's ideological commitments are like his religious commitments, in that they run deep and change little. They suffuse his professional and personal relationships; they suffuse his sense of self. They are like vested interests, only deeper and more permanent.

Honestly, do you not like to know where the speaker stands?

For a professor in the social sciences or humanities, his ideological sensibilities bear on his professional discourse. Some say, just be truthful. But truthfulness leaves things vastly under-determined. There are a lot of truths out there, most not worth bothering with. Professors must make judgments not only about whether a statement is true, but whether it is important.

Part of the professor's job is to select and formulate *the most important things*. Governmental institutions are the most powerful institutions in society. It is natural to instruct students in their understanding of government and in ways of judging its actions and policies.

The professor selects certain issues as most important. For an issue, he must select and formulate positions as most important. For each position he must select and formulate arguments, for and against, as most important.

Each of two professors can teach a course in labour economics and make all of his statements reasonably true, by our lights. But the two courses may nonetheless be very different in ideological flavour. We may object strongly to one of the courses, not for its errors of commission, but its errors of omission.

Moreover, truth itself is embedded in interpretation. Two alternative ways of interpreting are not always neatly ranked in 'truth' value. Different professors will appeal to different authorities, such as those published in the 'top' journals or by Harvard University Press (HUP). But is HUP an unbiased authority? (One study, Gordon and Nilsson, 2010, finds the press tilting left.) In

the background the professor makes judgments about the authorities, the evidence and the materials.

And in satisfying truthfulness, statements are malleable. A statement made categorically might be untrue, but becomes true when qualified with 'often' or 'sometimes'.

There is courtesy in telling your students your ideological views. It alerts them to watch out for whether you give counter-arguments short shrift. It invites them to think critically about how your ideological sensibilities affect the lesson. Many students probably wonder: 'Where is my professor coming from?' Ideological openness is a step toward transparency, and people like it. That is why Wikipedia entries on a professor often mention his or her ideology.

Openness also alerts students to the fact that other professors see things differently. I tell students that I think that the minimum-wage law should be abolished, but also that a large portion of economists do not support such a reform. Self-disclosing informs students that economists are heterogeneous. It teaches them a healthy suspicion of those who would pretend otherwise.

Disclosure also clarifies the competition of ideas. They may take you to personify an outlook or philosophy. My students might associate me with the school of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman or Adam Smith, maybe with television personalities such as John Stossel or Andrew Napolitano. Openness helps them relate the classroom to the wider discourse.

Also, openness invites students to go deeper. Knowing that I am interested in advancing classical liberalism, they more readily approach me about that. This is a natural development in the student–professor relationship.

It can be dangerous to pretend that ideology can be separated from scholarly judgment. On such an idea, the universities may assure us that their faculty members know to 'keep their ideology out their teaching'. Are you reassured?

And if professors simply make their teaching ideologically bland, is that really an improvement?

For me, 'ideology' is not a dirty word. My complaint about the professoriate is not that they are ideological, but that – speaking here within the context of our generally fairly liberal culture – so few of them belong to ideologies of the more enlightened sort.

Ideological self-disclosure has been defended by several economists but especially the thoughtful social democrat and Nobel laureate Gunnar Myrdal. His being enthusiastic for social democracy may have been a lapse in wisdom, even in his small, homogeneous land of Sweden. But his arguments for ideological self-disclosure have many merits. His argument is developed eloquently in *Objectivity in Social Research* (1969). Here are just a couple of samples:

'Like people in general, social scientists are apt to conceal valuations and conflicts between valuations by stating their positions as if they were simply logical inferences from the facts. Since, like ordinary people, they suppress valuations as valuations and give only "reasons," their perception of reality easily becomes distorted, that is, biased [p. 50].'

'Biases are thus not confined to the practical and political conclusions drawn from research. They are much more deeply seated than that. They are the unfortunate results of concealed valuations that insinuate themselves into research at all stages, from its planning to its final presentation. As a result of their concealment, they are not properly sorted out and can thus be kept undefined and vague [p. 52].'

'I am arguing here that value premises should be made explicit so that research can aspire to the "objective" – in the only sense this term can have in the social sciences. But we also need to specify them for the broader purposes of honesty, clarity, and conclusiveness in scientific inquiry [p. 56].'

If Myrdal's suggestion differs from mine, it is only that his suggestion is to articulate your deeper underlying valuations. In my view, such articulations will, by nature, be platitudinous, and perhaps not informative. I think that Myrdal was really suggesting what I am suggesting, which is to be open about your ideological character, your outlook.

Adam Smith, too, would likely smile on self-disclosure. He wrote:

'Frankness and openness conciliate confidence. We trust the man who seems willing to trust us. We see clearly, we think, the road by which he means to conduct us, and we abandon ourselves with pleasure to his guidance and direction. Reserve and concealment, on the contrary, call forth diffidence.'

(Smith, 1976 [1790], p. 337)

And Frédéric Bastiat practised such an approach:

'I confess that I am one of those who think that the choice, the impulse, should come from below, not from above, from the citizens, not from the legislator; and the contrary doctrine seems to me to lead to the annihilation of liberty and human dignity.'

(Bastiat, 1964, p. 12)

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