

*A Note Left Hanging at the Gate**

“...the doorkeeper laughs and says: ‘If you are so drawn to it, just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of the doorkeepers. From hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last. The third doorkeeper is already so terrible that even I cannot bear to look on him.’ These are difficulties the man from the country has not expected; the Law [or the discussion of a scientific topic], he thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone...” – Kafka

I am not much inclined to tackle the mammoth task of an exhaustive critique of objections to even discussing topics in which I am quite interested. That is a logical mine field that I am ill-equipped to clear. However, specific objections that were levied with regard to considerations of the seriousness of entering such a discussion that should have taken place prior to entering it has motivated a few counter arguments.

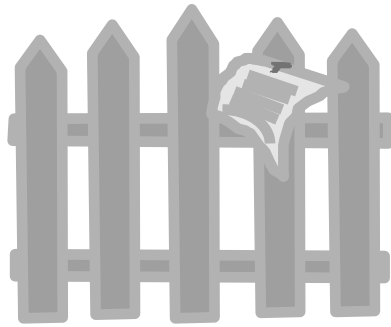
Having made pledges with neither the Devil nor a benevolent Dictator Deity concerning topics I *will* or will *not* discuss, I am a free agent to my knowledge and to the extent that anyone else’s concern comes into play. I have morals that preclude my propounding what I consider immoral courses of action, of course, but I value freedom of thought and expression very highly. Establishmentarianism is abhorrent to me. If others have taken sacred oaths precluding such intellectual freedoms, they should definitely abstain. But it seems to me that to even raise such objections requires hypocrisy of the objector, who must single-handedly wrestled with the very issues pertinent to the debate in which he would then admonish others not to engage.



The objector argued that ‘intellectuals have a responsibility’ for their images and roles in society, which if shirked may cause a profound sense of sadness in those who respect them because of a perceived demise of quality in the culture in our society. First of all, one cannot say there is ‘no responsibility’ to avoid what might in some way be harmful to someone else. So, to sidestep that little trap, let’s just say that I believe that ‘intellectuals’ (whatever that entails and whoever they happen to be) need feel minimal obligation to society for their images and roles. This does not seem to me to be much of a value judgment on my part. It is simply my assessment of the conduct of great intellectuals throughout history – in fact those that I respect most highly.

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James Joyce considered intellectuals to be the *outlaws* of society. Far from worrying about maintaining positive images and being upstanding role models, they have typically done the opposite almost as an obligation. Mozart was one of note whose playful irascibility was a great source of irritation to many influential people of his time. Newton's behavior was an embarrassment. Furthermore, there is a major logical flaw in assuming that an *intellectual* of magnitude even knows that he is such. William James, for example, woke up later in life to the fact that he was at the top of his field, having throughout his earlier life been totally unaware of that eventuality. Jesus' escapades of youth are hidden from record and, therefore, he may have defiled his image without our even knowing it. Frequently '*World Class Intellectual*' is bestowed as a posthumous honor of which the recipient himself would have been totally incredulous. History has a way of *jumping in front of* 'great' individuals *after the fact* no matter how hard they may have tried to avoid it. In short, such inhibitions would seem too conscious of the eventual historical intellectual status of the living to have much if any credibility. Who but a charlatan would presume ahead of time that he himself would achieve such status. Informal discussions are typically noteworthy to no one but participants.



Life is too short for such arrogance and presumption; we must just proceed with what is of interest to us and share what seems of value, leaving it to others to decide whether or not that is in fact the case. We will certainly achieve nothing of significance in any other way, and then we must live with the results. If we have entered blind allies, so be it. If we have been irreverent for what we considered to be worthwhile, any truly benevolent God would forgive us and we have no recourse with any other kind of deity. As far as what civilization may have to say of us, we certainly have very little to say about that.

The records of those accepted intellectuals sometimes cited in this context as examples of ill-advisedly having spoken out for or against some specific cause is spotty at best. They've made fools of themselves as frequently as they've been correct to be sure. Bungling in areas where they were completely out of their element has not seemed to have adversely affected their status in their own fields where it has remained untarnished. Linus Pauling became a little 'unacceptable' in his old age although I must say that I *do* take my daily 2,000 mg of vitamin C primarily in deference to Linus in spite of more knowledgeable denials of its efficacy. His complaints about nuclear testing? Well, you tell me.

Lord Russell became somewhat of a senile old crank although, again, I espoused his position with regard to invading Viet Nam having been one awful mistake. And philosophy has seemed *beyond* many 'intellectual' celebrities – particularly in the sciences – but that has not quieted their opinions on such topics nor ruined their professional reputations in any case.

To wait at the gate, as in Kafka's great parable, 'Before the Law', for a doorkeeper to say "all things are now ready" is the surest way to disinherit oneself. A doorkeeper's role is *not* one with

which I sympathize in any intellectual discussion. It is imperative to ignore the *keeper of the gate* and consider the *mansion* even to the extent of questioning whether it should be taken by force lest in the end the gatekeeper should laugh and say, "...this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it." What could be sadder than that?

In memory of Ron Penner



