

# Kathy Griffin and the vanishing of argument

By now the whole world has heard about comedian Kathy Griffin's appalling staged-photo of herself holding a mock-up of the bloody, severed head of Donald Trump. Despite her rather pathetic apology, a firestorm of protest has broken out pretty much everywhere. To say that this stunt was in poor taste or, in the parlance of our times, "offensive," would be the understatement of the decade. At a time when the most barbarous people on the planet are, in point of fact, decapitating their enemies and holding up the heads as trophies, it simply beggars belief that Griffin would have imagined this escapade as an acceptable form of social protest.

But I would like to situate what Griffin did in a wider context, for it is but a particularly brutal example of what is taking place throughout our society, especially on university campuses. Speakers of a more conservative stripe, ranging from serious academics such as Charles Murray and Heather McDonald to provocateurs such as Ann Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos, have been shouted down, obstructed, insulted, and in extreme cases physically assaulted on the grounds of institutes of higher learning throughout the United States. Very recently, at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, a tenured professor was compelled to hold his biology class in a public park. His crime? He had publicly criticized a planned "Day of Absence" during which white students, staff, and faculty were coerced into leaving the campus, since people of color claimed they felt "unsafe" at the college. For calling this blatantly racist move by its proper name, the professor was, of course, himself labeled a racist and mobs of angry students shut down his classes, forcing him to lecture in the park.

What is most striking to me in all of this is the obvious lack of anything resembling

rational argument. Students are not posing counter-positions, marshaling evidence, drawing logical conclusions, proposing more convincing scenarios, etc. In a word, they are not arguing with their opponents. They are bullying them, drowning them out, intimidating them, physically attacking them. This is not only irrational; it is deeply disrespectful, for it fundamentally denies the humanity of their adversaries. Nowhere is this de-humanization more patently evident than in the case of Kathy Griffin's protest. And the impatience with argument is rooted in a more basic assumption of many on the left—which is precisely why this violence is breaking out in environments where a radical ideology holds sway. I'm talking about the questioning of objective truth and the concomitant hyper-valorization of the self-assertive will. It is a commonplace on the left that claims to objective truth are thinly-veiled plays of power, attempts by one group to impose its views on another. Accordingly, "truth" is construed as a function of the will of the individual. I determine the meaning of my life, and you determine the meaning of yours; I decide my gender and you decide yours—and therefore the best we can do together is tolerate one another's choices.

But when there is no truth, there can be no argument, for argument depends upon a shared appeal to certain epistemic and ethical values. If I might propose an analogy, it's something like the common rules that make a game possible. Precisely because the players all agree to certain strictures and delimitations, real play can ensue. If every participant is making up the rules as he goes along and according to his whim, the game promptly evanesces. Indeed, if we continue with this analogy, the game, in fact, doesn't simply disappear; it devolves into bickering and finally into violence, since the players have no other recourse for the adjudication of their disputes. Now we can see why it is a very short step indeed from epistemic and moral relativism in the classroom to violence on the quad. Since I can't argue with my opponent, I can only silence him, de-humanize him, shut him down.

The valorization of will over intellect is described by the technical term “voluntarism,” and the roots of this ideology are tangled indeed. Jean-Paul Sartre and Michel Foucault were advocates of it in the twentieth century, and they both found their inspiration in the nineteenth-century German theoretician, Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* (Superman) stood blithely beyond the conventional categories of good and evil and determined the meaning of his life through his limitless will to power. The problem, of course, is what happens when two Supermen clash, when two limitless wills collide. The only path forward, Nietzsche correctly intuited, would be warfare—and let the strongest survive. What should be clear to everyone is that this has remained anything but high theorizing, that in fact Nietzsche’s vision now dances in the heads of most young people in our society today.

Are we surprised, therefore, that stridency, anger, violence, censorship, and the will to power dominate the public conversation? I realize that it might sound a bit frumpy to put it this way, but the path forward is better epistemology.