

Afterwords

You've Got Mail: Teaching Osama bin Laden's "Letter to the Americans"¹

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"For against an objector who sticks at nothing, the defense should stick at nothing."

—Aristotle, *Topics* V.4 (134a1-3)

I use the phrase "dialectical excellence" in a somewhat revisionary way to name a set of moral-intellectual capacities canonically associated with a "dialectical" tradition in philosophy that includes the Platonic dialogues, Aristotle's treatises on dialectic and rhetoric, Cicero's dialogues, Thomas Aquinas's *Summas*, and John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* and *On Liberty*. What makes these texts "dialectical" (as I see it) is their attention to philosophy as a conversational activity, with particular attention to the adversarial or polemical features of philosophical conversation. Philosophy in this tradition vindicates or refutes controversial claims in order publicly to demonstrate their truth or falsity to an educated but potentially indifferent, skeptical, or even hostile audience. As conceived in this tradition, "dialectical excellence" names the capacity, in adversarial contexts, to refute a sophistical argument in a rhetorically effective way.

¹ The most easily accessible online version of bin Laden's 2002 "Letter to the Americans" is the one posted at the website of *The Guardian*, accessed online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>. An earlier version of this article was first presented on April 16, 2011, at the 17th Annual Conference of the Association for Core Texts and Courses, two weeks prior to Osama bin Laden's death at the hands of the U.S. Special Operations Command. Given my focus on bin Laden's message rather than his person, however, I refer to that message in the present tense throughout the essay.

So understood, dialectical excellence demands three sets of skills of its practitioners. One set is intellectual: the capacity to identify sophistry and factual inaccuracy at the weakest and most fundamental junctures of an adversary's arguments. A second set is rhetorical: a facility with language (ideally, more than one) that enables one to put one's case in its most rhetorically effective form, rousing the moral passions of one's audience, without exploiting the ignorance or irrationality that so often accompanies such passions. A third set is psychological: the disposition to maintain confidence in one's case without losing one's composure, lapsing into dogmatism, or giving in to intimidation. Dialectical excellence, we might say, requires the integration of all three skills in a single person, along with the readiness and ability to use those skills in the right way at the right time for the right reasons.²

Over the past several years, I've had students in upper-division philosophy and political science classes read and engage with Osama bin Laden's so-called "Letter to the Americans"³ (hereafter "Letter"), a manifesto posted on the Internet in Arabic about a year after the 9/11 attack, later translated into English, but ironically almost entirely unknown to its putative addressees. In brief overview: the "Letter" offers an extended justification for the 9/11 attacks, blaming Americans for having brought the attacks on themselves, promising further attacks if the U.S. government continues its present policies in the Near East, and enjoining Americans both to change those policies and to convert immediately to (bin Laden's form of) Islam. In overarching form, the Letter is a not-very-subtle ultimatum threatening mass murder in the event of non-compliance, adding some gratuitous insults along the way.

² Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999), II.6, 1106b20ff.

³ I refer throughout this article to students I've taught over the last decade at Felician University (2008-2018), a small Catholic-Franciscan liberal arts institution in New Jersey. Though I have not specifically taught bin Laden's letter outside of the United States, I have discussed related topics (Islamism, terrorism, U.S. foreign policy) with undergraduates at Forman Christian College and University in Lahore, Pakistan, and with undergraduates, master's students, and law students at Al Quds University in Abu Dis, Palestine. Pakistani and Palestinian students' claims on this topic are, to put it mildly, radically different from those offered by American students. I hope to discuss this issue on a different occasion.

Why promote such a document—raving in demeanor, murderous in prescription—to prominence within the undergraduate curriculum? The answer, I think, is that the Letter is an extraordinarily good counterfeit of dialectical excellence, and like all good counterfeits, offers the perfect opportunity for exercise in recognizing (and in this case, acquiring) the real thing.⁴ Its cleverness and rhetoric skillfully conceal its inaccuracy, incoherence, and immorality, a fact that takes some difficult but instructive work to grasp.

Rhetorically at least, bin Laden's Letter exemplifies dialectical excellence to a higher degree than most American political or theological discourse intended for a comparably broad audience. As a purely formal matter, the Letter has the structural integrity of a Scholastic *questio* out of Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*. As Bruce Lawrence puts the point: "In a feature of the Arab *fatwa* tradition, opinions are here couched as detailed responses to specific questions, [and] broken down into sections and subsections in such a way as to emphasize the irrefutable logic of *jihad*."⁵ The result is a document that, on its own terms at least, makes a clearer and more cogent case than almost any comparable American work.

Form aside, the Letter manages to say *more* than comparable recent American documents, and seems to presume a higher intellectual level on the part of its audience. Where, for instance, George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address focuses pointillistically and in amnesiac fashion on the 9/11 attacks and their immediate aftermath,⁶ bin Laden's Letter puts the attacks in a wider and more informative historical context, marshalling a wealth of evidence to demonstrate that (on bin Laden's terms) the U.S. has for decades been a systematic aggressor deserving of massive retaliatory response. Where the speeches of American pundits, clerics, and politicians circa 2001-2002 serve up an embarrassing hash of bravado and sentimentality, bin Laden offers his audience what one

⁴ Thanks to Amy Lynch for a helpful conversation on the expertise involved in recognizing counterfeit currency.

⁵ Bruce Lawrence, "Editor's Commentary," in *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*, ed. Bruce Lawrence, trans. James Howarth (New York: Verso Press, 2005), p. 160.

⁶ Accessed online at: <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

commentator calls a “magnificent,” “eloquent,” and “even at times poetic” expression of moral self-assurance,⁷ and what another has described as “the authentic, compelling voice of a visionary,” expressing “what can only be called a powerful lyricism.”⁸ Little in *Vital Speeches of the Day* from the last few decades survives rhetorical comparison with bin Laden’s Letter, and as far as I know, no comparable American document exists that rebuts his claims as thoroughly as he makes them.

Having appreciated the Letter’s narrowly rhetorical merits, however, the fact remains that morally and intellectually, its argument is an abject failure. Morally, much of what bin Laden says in it consists of platitudes insufficiently determinate to settle any dispute between bin Laden and his American adversaries. As bin Laden’s moral claims become more determinate, they also become more controversial, but the more controversial they become, the less he offers in the way of argument for them beyond question-begging citations of Scripture, question-begging even from an orthodox Islamic perspective. Moral claims aside, almost every historical or political claim in the Letter is either straightforwardly false or else ridiculously under-argued, a fact that bin Laden brazenly evades throughout the text. Finally, the Letter practically radiates illogic and bad faith: this is a document that, on the one hand, rationalizes mass murder on the grounds that “the Americans” have stolen “our” oil (*whose* oil?), and, on the other hand, rationalizes the same act on the grounds that the Americans show insufficient concern for the perils of anthropogenic global warming. Incoherence of this sort is par for the course throughout the Letter, and indeed, throughout the entire bin Ladenite Corpus.

I’ve assigned the Letter to undergraduates at Felician in three courses: an upper-division course on ethics where the topic of moral and cultural relativism comes up (PHIL 301, Moral Philosophy); a basic course on international relations where terrorism comes up (PSCI 303, International Relations); and an independent study I’ve designed on cultural conflict between “Islam” and “the West” (PHIL 420, Islam and the West: Encounter and Conflict). Regardless of the course, the basic question at issue is whether an objective verdict on the Letter’s claims is possible, and if so, what the verdict ought to be. After a class

⁷ Bernard Lewis, “License to Kill: Usama bin Laden’s Declaration of *Jihad*,” *Foreign Affairs* vol. 77, no. 6 (November/December 1998), p. 14.

⁸ Lawrence, “Introduction,” p. xvii.

session or two of discussion, I ask students to write a short paper defending their own views on that question. Given the unfamiliarity to them of bin Laden's historical and political assertions, I allow them to remain agnostic where they lack the knowledge to reach a verdict, but ask that they identify what further facts they would need to know in order to reach one. Since, I suggest, any thinking reader would have to reach a verdict of some kind on bin Laden's claims, it is worth knowing whether such verdicts can be defended, and if so, how. I insist, sincerely, that I am open to *any* verdict, positive or negative. Counterintuitive as it may seem, that insistence is central to the pedagogical value of the exercise.

The results are pretty disheartening; indeed, few assignments so starkly reveal students' dialectical weaknesses as this one. The reactions I usually get fall into two rough categories, which I call *fideist resistance* and *thoughtful acquiescence*. In some cases, these categories represent two distinctly different groups of students; in other cases, they represent the same student at different phases of engagement with the Letter. In both cases, I suggest, they represent dialectical failure.

The fideist resister is *a priori* convinced that the Letter's claims must all be wrong; that Americans everywhere are and have always been innocents; that the U.S. government could "never have done" what bin Laden accuses it of doing; and (paradoxically) that even if the U.S. *were* entirely guilty of bin Laden's indictment, its guilt would have no bearing on the cogency of his case. According to the fideist resister, it is our duty categorically to condemn bin Laden, whether or not we have an explanation for why he attacked us, and whether or not we are capable of evaluating the reasons he gave for doing so. The vehemence of our repudiation of bin Laden is the measure of our virtue, and there is apparently no better guarantor of virtue so conceived than the steadfast refusal to deal with anything that might cast doubt on our moral beliefs.

I've stated the view in its extreme form, but commitment to it comes in degrees. In its more moderate forms, fideist resisters will engage with the Letter in a half-hearted way, taking issue with this or that claim, but ultimately expressing impatience or exasperation with bin Laden's tendency to dwell on "ancient history." Since the history in question is unfamiliar and temporally distant, such students infer that historical considerations must *themselves* be irrelevant to so recent

an event as 9/11.⁹ Fideist resisters tend not to notice that their argument (such as it is) cuts both ways: If historical claims are irrelevant to the justice of bin Laden's claims, they must equally be irrelevant to that of his victims. On the fideist resister's view it therefore becomes our duty to veto historical inquiry into bin Laden's case, even if we have to forswear the discovery that the facts are on our side.

The thoughtfully acquiescent reader rejects the dogmatic and self-defeating character of the fideist resister's strategy, and resolves instead to give bin Laden a fair hearing. Having done so, however, this reader quickly runs into alien territory, and then gets bogged down in it; bin Laden's accusations against the Americans are practically designed to strike this sort of reader as both maddeningly obscure and yet vaguely guilt-inducing. Within a few sentences, the fair-minded but dialectically inexperienced reader encounters a barrage of obscure but overheated references to "your" atrocities at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as those in Palestine, Iraq, Somalia, Lebanon, Algeria, and the Philippines. The reader is held personally responsible for environmental degradation and the evils of globalization, and is treated to a detailed guilt-trip over "your" addiction to drugs, pornography, and lucre. The guilt-trip seems at once over the top and yet troublingly plausible. The acquiescent reader has no idea of what to make of bin Laden's history lesson, and (being both acquiescent and allergic to history) is disinclined to seek clarification. But bin Laden's attack on capitalism, hedonism, and consumerism doesn't *need* clarification; the thoughtfully acquiescent student has heard all of that before, and is prepared—even eager—to allocute to the charges.¹⁰

And so, this student concludes, bin Laden must surely "have a point" about all the ancient history he brings up. Since he does, it must

⁹ Of course, as time passes, 9/11 becomes less and less recent an event, so that a fair number of students regard *it* as "ancient history," and are reflexively bored by the mention of it.

¹⁰ Contrary to a frequently repeated claim, bin Laden does not restrict his criticisms of the U.S. to the imperialist features of its foreign policy, but repeatedly and explicitly attacks the theory and practice of American freedom as such, treating American foreign policy as one expression of American freedom among others. An egregiously inaccurate version of the claim has been promulgated for years by ex-CIA agent Michael Scheuer; for a representative instance, see his interview with Fox Business (March 4, 2013), accessed online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ES-xWjzZwZE>.

be safe to take his version of historical events roughly at face value. The less dialectically expert the student, the greater the tendency to turn “roughly at face value” into “essentially at face value,” and eventually into fundamental acceptance of bin Laden’s version of twentieth-century history. Having accepted bin Laden’s historical narrative without a fight, our thoughtful reader is now surprised to discover how “reasonable” bin Laden sounds. For what is he saying but that al-Qaida attacked “us” because “we” attacked “them” first? And how wrong could he be, if “we” were by all accounts occupying “his” lands with “our” tanks and “our” troops? In that case, bin Laden is probably right to suggest that things would go better if only we dealt with one another (in his words) “on the basis of mutual interests and benefits.” Doing so surely seems preferable to fighting bloody and interminable wars against “his” people. In my experience, students rarely if ever quarrel with bin Laden’s use of pronouns, buying into it, and conceding most of his case right from the start.

Like the fideist resister’s view, this one comes in degrees: sympathy for bin Laden’s case co-exists in guilty and confused fashion with vehement expressions of rejection, revulsion, and contempt, and with expressions of patriotism. But the essential feature of thoughtful acquiescence is the assumption that acquiescence in bin Laden’s case is more expedient than inquiry into it. We are, on the thoughtful acquiescer’s view, entitled or obliged to treat bin Laden’s assertions (particularly his historical assertions) as a substitute for such an inquiry, and to offer a verdict not on the facts as such (which are regarded as inaccessible on principle) but on his assertions, taking their approximate truth essentially on faith.

The upshot of the exercise is that whether they are fideist resisters or thoughtful acquiescers, our students have a predisposition to believe what bin Laden wants them to believe. The fideist resister resists inquiry into bin Laden’s case because he fears that bin Laden might well turn out to be *right*. The thoughtful acquiescer resists inquiry into that case because she sees no reason to think that bin Laden could be *that* wrong. What seems lost on these students is the possibility that moral and historical inquiry into bin Laden’s claims might yield a verdict that was objectively true, rationally justified, and yet thoroughly negative. Unfortunately, this is just another way of saying that what seems lost on them is the idea of moral inquiry into history as such.

In my view, the dialectical ineffectuality of our students (or at least *my* students, defeasibly taken as representative of a larger

population) points to serious weaknesses in American higher education. Powerful institutional biases militate against the inculcation of dialectical excellence there, all of which deserve challenge. Consider three problems from a much longer list.

For one thing, dialectical excellence demands high intellectual standards along with what Aristotle calls *paideia*, the general educatedness that makes a person a good judge in every area of life that calls for judgment.¹¹ Despite the wearisome talk of “assessment,” “rubrics,” “mission statements,” “Bloom’s taxonomy,” and so on foisted on us by bureaucrats, accreditation agencies, and administrators, we lack any serious way of assessing or rewarding success at *paideia*, and so, lack the thing itself. To be more specific, I would argue that dialectical excellence requires a more concerted emphasis on informal logic as conceived of in the Aristotelian tradition (a.k.a., “critical thinking”), and a more serious emphasis on the study of history, especially world history, conveyed less by textbooks than by real historiography.¹² Unfortunately, allegiance to the usual disciplinary (and other) tribalisms makes this an unlikely outcome, as does the loss of interest in non-STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) fields, along with the widespread skepticism and cynicism about the value of higher education now prevalent in the United States.¹³

¹¹ Cf. Aristotle, *De Partibus Animalium*, trans. D. M. Balme, rev. Allan Gotthelf (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), I.1, 639a1-12; Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), IV.4, 1006a5-7; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.3, 1095a1-12.

¹² For an excellent discussion of the teaching of history, see Christopher Hitchens, “Why Americans Are Not Taught History,” in Christopher Hitchens, *Love, Poverty, and War: Journeys and Essays* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), pp. 265-78. For further thoughts on teaching 9/11, see Irfan Khawaja, “‘Why They Hate Us’: A Pedagogical Proposal,” *Philosophy of Education in the Era of Globalization*, eds. Yvonne Raley and Gerhard Preyer (New York: Routledge Press, 2010), pp. 91-109.

¹³ For example, in the fall of 2013, my own institution conducted a “prioritization review” based on advice offered by Robert C. Dickeson, author of *Prioritizing Academic Programs and Services: Reallocating Resources to Achieve Strategic Balance* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2010), and President and Principal of Academic Strategy Partners, a consulting firm. Though Dickeson makes *pro forma* reference to Aristotle in his book (on

Second, dialectical excellence demands rhetorical facility and research skills that are nowadays almost entirely the responsibility of overburdened Departments of English, where the *modus operandi* is to cram everything into that old standby, English 101 (“English Composition,” “Writing the College Essay,” etc.). Despite the efforts of the faculty who teach such thankless courses, there is no way to wrest dialectical excellence from functional illiteracy in a single semester, and no way to retain whatever literacy is achieved if the gains of that single semester are forgotten or subverted for seven (or more) subsequent semesters. Suffice it to say that if real literacy is the object, we need to rethink how things are done.

Third, dialectical excellence demands a certain psychological toughness from its practitioners that is incompatible with the “sensitivity” that is now routinely expected of both students and faculty in the classroom. We all like to be liked, but a good dialectician gives higher priority to the task of refuting sophistry and exposing falsehood than to popularity or niceness, something guaranteed to hurt the feelings of those folk in the grips of such things. At a certain point, we simply have to admit (and get administrators to admit) that hurt feelings are an integral part of real intellectual life. Many dire fears are expressed, some of them justified, about the consequences of teaching students controversial subjects in a less-than-welcoming academic environment. Much less is said about the incoherence, ignorance, and lassitude that are the predictable result of a low-pressure classroom environment, where everyone is allowed to emote with impunity because the work of dialectical contestation would generate more discomfort than is currently thought tolerable. But as matters stand, I would suggest that the “sensitive” classroom has done at least as much damage to American higher education as has the “mean” one, not that those options exhaust the possibilities. In any case, the fact remains that the “sensitive” classroom is systematically *insensitive* to the

paideia no less, p. 45), I can attest—as the primary author of the prioritization review for Felician University’s Philosophy Department—that a standard-issue “academic and administrative prioritization review” is little more than a bureaucratic assault on the existence of non-STEM academic programs, carried out in the name of something called “strategic balance.” For a good discussion of the trend I have in mind, see Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

psychological requirements of dialectical excellence, a fact that has to be entered into any credible cost-benefit analysis.

Excellence in any field is easier discussed than achieved, and dialectical excellence is no exception. But if achieving it seems optional, consider the consequences of dialectical mediocrity. It may seem hyperbolic to suggest that we face a choice between dialectical excellence on the one hand, and murderous insanity on the other, but it's a hypothesis worth considering. As the twentieth century ought to have taught us, a society's discursive mediocrity leaves a vacuum easily filled by sophistry in the service of mass murder—think of Czarist Russia, Weimar Germany, or the colonial and post-colonial Near East. Bin Laden's Letter teaches us that lesson once again. We owe it to our students to enable them to learn it.¹⁴

¹⁴ I dedicate this essay to Marilyn Bornstein, Benjamin Estilow (1930-2010), and Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011), my first mentors in dialectical excellence. Thanks also to George Abauza, Fahmi Abboushi, Kristen Abbey, David Banach, Joseph Biehl, Carrie-Ann Biondi, Jeff Buechner, Richard Burnor, Donald Casey, Michael DeFilippo, Gerald Graff, Christopher Hitchens, Amy Lynch, Julie O'Connell, Charles Persky, Gail Persky, Hilary Persky, Neil Robertson, and Joseph Spoerl for many helpful conversations on the issues discussed here.

