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## How to Treat Heresy

Aurelius Prudentius Clemens was born in 348 A.D. in a province in what is now Northern Spain. Early in his life, he achieved success as a lawyer and governor, but later he transitioned into a poet. Among his many influential works, which were heavily influenced by his Christian predecessors, “Psychomachia” is particularly noteworthy for its allegorical themes couched in various battles between personified vices and virtues. One such skirmish takes place when the Vice called Discord infiltrates the Virtues’ ranks. Since individuals will always challenge established dogmas, my thesis is that this battle shows that the nature of discord determines what is heresy, that no heretic should be met with physical intimidation, since she is the minority, and finally that heretics need more protection from the status quo, since the latter group need not defend themselves. This thesis is significant since it contrasts with Thomas Szasz’ view on heretics, which is that no heretic should be met with emotional intimidation or manipulation.

In the following passage, Discord infiltrates the Virtues’ ranks after a bloody battle between Vices like Fraud and Crime and Virtues such as Peace. Having eradicated war, the victorious Virtues were singing and beating drums on a cloudless battlefield illuminated by the dazzling light of heaven, when suddenly Harmony was punctured with a dagger. It turns out that Discord had been hiding among the squadrons disguised as a comrade. Although she did not pierce Harmony’s vitals, the army was nevertheless enraged by the sight of blood. Surrounded by a furious mob, Discord, pale and terrified, stated the following: “*Discordia dicor, cognomento Heresis; deus est mihi discolor. Nunc minor aut maior, modo duplex et modo simplex; cum placet, aërius et de fantasmate visus; aut innata anima est, quotiens volo ludere numen. praeceptor Belia mihi, domus et plaga mundus.*” In English, the passage reads “I am called Discord, with a surname of Heresy; the god is to me unchangeable. Now less and also greater, sometimes twofold and sometimes single; when it is pleasing [to me], [he is] an airborne

sight and from a ghost; or he is the inborn soul, however often I wish to ridicule the name. Devil is the teacher for me, the world [is] the home and the country.” However, Discord’s confession was cut short when her throat and tongue were stabbed by Faith, who had heard enough. In Prudentius-like fashion, the army brutally tore her to pieces and fed her to dogs. Contained in this short confession however is Prudentius’ suggestion that there is a complex relationship between the concepts Discord and Heresy.

Typically, Heresy refers to beliefs or opinions which deviate from traditional or established orthodoxies. Since Heresy was unbeknownst to the virtues before she revealed herself, Prudentius may be suggesting that deviants might intentionally disguise themselves to fit in with those whose beliefs are accepted and established. However, when such heretics reveal their true colors, the majority, having found out, will no longer want to live in harmony with them. This passage is also interesting for showing that disagreeing with the majority has enormous consequences on chaos and power dynamics between opposing groups. Prudentius writes that Discord has a surname of Heresy, which may imply that Discord is only one of the many forms that Heresy can take. Upon closer inspection however, the relationship between Discord and Heresy is that the nature of the former determines the definition of the latter. Those who disagree typically classify matters either as debatable or as utter blasphemy depending on how discussing those matters make them feel. However it is clearly the group with more power who controls what should be openly debated and what should not be brought up at all. This is why Discord was the only Vice which was virtually indistinguishable from the virtues she was surrounded by. The Virtues in the passage represent powerful people holding traditional beliefs, and such people do not care whether matters which they deem are non-threatening are debated; however, as soon as they felt threatened by the minority, they re-classified healthy discourse as

heresy and attempted to silence it immediately, as they did to Heresy. For another example, within most, if not all countries, violence is never justified as a means of settling disagreements, in contrast with Prudentius' story. However, governments do justify going to war with each other to settle disagreements. In other words, Discord is defined by those in power: it is a Virtue – a necessary and good part of life – if they want it to be, but otherwise disagreements must be settled by blood, which is exactly what Prudentius suggests in the passage. Hence in a discord, the definition of heresy is determined by the powerful group.

This sort of power imbalance still exists in certain countries around the world and discourages heretics from trying to speak in various ways. In the United States however, anyone can openly discuss almost anything, which might not have been true during the time when Prudentius wrote "Psychomachia." However, this passage remains relevant because the consequences of showing disagreement still exist today, some of which are the same that Prudentius mentioned, and in some ways the new consequences might be worse than the ones from two millennia ago. What used to be heresy and death for saying heretical things is now "free speech" and all the consequences that follow from exercising it. For example several presidents of Ivy League schools recently had to answer whether calling for the genocide of Jews is against the respective universities' codes of conduct. The answer all three of them gave was that it is context dependent. In the time of Prudentius, a response this unpopular with the status quo might have signed the death warrants of those who gave it; it did warrant the Virtues' physical violence against Discord. But nevertheless these presidents' fates were sealed the moment they practiced free speech. The presidents of top universities are exactly who we might view metaphorically as Virtues – people who uphold and enforce the status quo. However their response clearly made Jewish people, who are a very successful group of people in the highest

positions of power everywhere, and other groups of people, feel threatened. This reveals that “free speech” is free because we have made it illegal as a society to cut the tongue of heretics as did Faith to Discord. But there is a price to pay for exercising this freedom; the Virtues of society will not cut the heretic’s tongue, but instead they will handicap the heretic’s livelihood and make it difficult for her to live in harmony with the majority.

In the modern age, when people who uphold the status quo feel threatened – sometimes understandably, but other times irrationally – by heretical ideas, who lived when Prudentius did, who live today, and who will live in the future, will sign petitions to force the resignation of professors, officials, and others who are not necessarily in positions of powerlessness, but who are powerless and pale and terrified against the horde of Virtues surrounding and intimidating them. For example, it is particularly risky for one to make any public statement on the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, for not only it is easy to be cast out as a heretic by those who disagree, but also the short-term benefits could outweigh the long-term personal consequences of exercising free speech.

Prudentius showed that Heresy can take on many forms by mentioning how Discord sees the God who governs her as twofold and being an “airborne sight” or “from a ghost.” In a disagreement, one cannot disagree without necessarily dissenting to the other, and one cannot dissent without necessarily stating the fact that he or she disagrees with something the other believes. However the ideas associated to words like dissent and heresy are entirely different from those associated to words like disagreement and discord. It seems like the former group of words naturally introduces power dynamics: one group is pitiful and misguided while the other is established and in-control. Based on the passage, it does not seem as though the majority needs to defend themselves; for by definition, they are the righteous Virtues who are in agreement with

each other, and they are especially content knowing that there are lots of people who share their beliefs. However by characterizing Heresy the defendant, Prudentius defines the heretic as the minority. And the story he creates to model the real world is accurate: when the majority has heard enough of what distastes it, it amputates the defendant's tongue – figuratively her voice, words, and ideas – and with it, her life. Anything which does not have a say in life is simply existing, not “living.”

Having established that Heresy carries a negative connotation, we, as did Prudentius, now separate it from the rest of the vices mentioned in “Psychomachia.” The reason Prudentius separates her is to show that no heretic should be met with physical intimidation. Heresy is distinct from her comrades because unlike them, she was never characterized as filthy, nor lustful, nor sluggish, nor lacking self-control, etc. In fact, she was the first Vice for whom Prudentius made us feel sorry. The story of a petrified and outnumbered character being killed so brutally was neither exciting nor satisfying as were the dramatic ways in which the other Vices met their ends. In fact, Heresy's death seems to be the first blunder that the virtues make in the war, and given how detail oriented Prudentius was, he intended for the Virtues' otherwise perfect campaign to be ruined by their unjust attack on Heresy. By associating tension and guilt with her death, Prudentius is warning us not to do the same to the heretics of our time.

Thomas Szasz, a psychiatrist most notable for his writings criticizing coercive practices in psychiatry, illuminates the powerless position of heretics in society. However the inherent vulnerability of heretics may be bad for the status quo, as Prudentius showed. In fact, Szasz might posit that the reason that Heresy is the Vice who causes most damage to the Virtues is that historically, self-proclaimed “virtuous” people have not only degraded those who dissent but also created scapegoats on whom to take out their frustrations. Since Szasz showed that “good”

people are capable of being on the wrong end of the moral compass, Prudentius' passage implies we should protect rather than intimidate heretics.

However, as Prudentius suggests, heresy can appear in many ways; in particular, nonconformity and skepticism are the common ones of today, and these characterizations make sense since heresy is not merely a moral or religious concept anymore. Along these lines, what sort of punishment might a modern-day heretic face? Well, the consequences faced by heretics who lived in Prudentius' time are more severe than those faced by modern-day heretics; a tongue is better than no tongue, and living with heretical ideas is better than dying for one's heretical ideas. However, people of the status quo in the modern age use the internet to make life particularly miserable for heretics – so miserable that they do not believe that speaking their mind is worth it. The most important benefit of the internet is that it makes information easy to distribute and access, but unfortunately the infrastructure needed to build and use makes certain people powerful – people who by definition have the status quo beliefs. Not only might heresies be filtered by those who control the internet, but also traditionalists may use the internet to attack heretics through hate speech and more. Since hate speech can be a warning for atrocity crimes or for events like suicide, internet leaders do all they can to moderate it, since otherwise they would be responsible for anything bad that follows. However, moderators of hate speech are far outnumbered by the army of “virtues” who regularly deface modern day heretics. By allowing blasphemy to exist, internet leaders allow people to arrive at their own conclusions, but at the same time they have put targets on the backs of heretics who speak their mind (which is not wrong to do), upon whom emotional pressure likely will be inflicted by those trying to intimidate them into silence.

Since in this specific example and in general, the status quo rarely faces huge responsibilities for its actions, there is much work that must be done to truly protect heretics. In “Psychomachia,” Discord was killed for her thoughts alone, but she did not kill anyone; even if she intended to, she could not, just as how heretics cannot overthrow the majority even if they want. What the passage then shows is that the minority becomes extremely vulnerable when she reveals herself as the minority to the majority. Prudentius’ passage begs us to realize that we cannot endorse the punishment that heretics face at the hands of a group which is far more powerful, large, and yet often happens to be potentially morally and empirically wrong as Szasz has shown. And as we have shown, advances in technology make it quite easy for dissenters to experience emotional stress in place of physical retaliation by the status quo. For example, government officials of an authoritarian regime may silence opposition by ordering an assassination or by imprisoning it forever. However, forbidding the heretic to speak, or to write, or to fight, does not actually change the heretical beliefs she holds. A government might dismember a heretic’s body as did the Virtues to Discord, thinking that heretical ideas die with the heretic. But the heretic does not die believing that she was insane. On the other hand, if a heretic undergoes tremendous mental stress, then there is a chance that she dies believing her beliefs were truly heretical; the reason she might finally see the heresy in herself is that the majority has convinced her to see herself from their point of view. Altogether, according to Prudentius, physical intimidation against heretics is wrong, and according to Szasz, emotional intimidation against heretics is wrong. In the former case we lose the heretic herself, but in the latter case we lose heretical ideas, which are more important than the heretic. Jean Calas, a French Protestant who was falsely accused of and indicted for murdering his son, was tortured on the wheel where he died, despite his protestations of innocence. No amount of torture



administered by the Catholic church, which claimed Calas killed his son because he thought he was going to convert to Catholicism, destroyed Calas' "heretical" insistence on innocence.

Although Calas himself died, his story became a symbol for religious intolerance.

"Psychomachia" is poetry which continues to impact the intersection of classical culture and the human condition. Since Heresy is not exclusively a theological concept, it is not obsolete; today it exists whenever individuals challenge conventional wisdom. Prudentius' passage agrees with this assessment: that heretics will always remain relevant, but that they should be tolerated, both physically and mentally, since societies will always grapple with evolving ideologies.