

# The Covid Era: The Necessary Virtues of Debate

By [Dr. Emanuel Garcia](#)

Global Research, June 08, 2023

Region: [Oceania](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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*I have always distrusted Philosophy insofar as philosophers attempted, in their armchairs, to circumscribe the entire universe with their systems. Life, as I know it, is a messy affair under virtually any circumstances, and anyone purporting to encapsulate the riddle of human existence into a nutshell of thought will be found wanting.*

Nonetheless I have admired the ancient Greeks for their incessant curiosity and dialogues, and in Plato's Socrates I believe we have enough to keep us cogitating forever. It was never the 'system' propounded by Plato, as, for example, in *The Republic*, but the ideal of free and open exchange as embodied by the Socrates he depicted, a Socrates, moreover who, as far as we know, wrote nothing.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Platonic Socrates always seemed to have a way of leading his auditors into the garden of his own conclusions, I admired the man for the irrepressible engagement of others and the catalysis of thought, of real, hard thinking.

Nowadays, in the face of disagreement, many are apt simply to rebuke those whose opinions differ and, all too often, to cut off further communication – what we call 'cancel culture'. But I continue to have great hope in the civil and courteous presentation of ideas, however they may differ, as both a means to inform and a means to approximate a new resolution of opposing tendencies.

When we here in New Zealand, following upon the great Canadian trucker protest, gathered on the grounds of Parliament in February 2022 in objection to the inoculation mandates and other measures adopted by the government that violated basic human rights, we invited members of Parliament to meet with us, to talk, to debate, to listen and to engage. Not one governmental representative deigned to do what was right and good and civil. In the end the government of Jacinda Ardern decided to launch a violent invasion on the territory of its people and proclaim a bizarre kind of victory over the malcontents – as we were described – whose distinguishing characteristics, according to their propaganda, were filth and violence.

Our pacific requests for courtesy and open debate had been shunned and now, over a year

since that infamous event, Dame Ardern has taken it upon herself to ensure that free speech is purged of misinformation, even if one person's misinformation may be another's truth. Governments have, as a rule, been specialists in the arts of deceit, and the ludicrous claim of Ardern's administration to be the 'single source of truth' for all things Covid, cannot be taken seriously – especially since that single source failed miserably in its duty to protect its citizens, although it succeeded with admirable efficiency in carrying out stringent measures of control and repression.

We should bear in mind that the 'single source' never supported Covid prevention and treatment, but did pursue a policy of coercive inoculation, in violation of its very own Bill of Rights. Lest anyone think that the lifted vaccine mandates have brought us back to normal, let me remind you that my colleagues in psychiatry who lost their jobs because they refused to be jabbed have lost their jobs forever: their former employers have not invited them back, despite a shortage of psychiatrists here in Wellington. I also note that job advertisements continue to stipulate Covid 'vaccination' as a prerequisite. So the government, not unlike Pontius Pilate, can wash its hands, revel in its virtuously magnanimous decision to restore our inalienable right to autonomy, all the while leaving employers to do the dirty work of imposing constraints upon hiring. No job unless fully jabbed.

To be fair I am uncertain how widespread these constraints are, but their mere existence is enough to disturb. Why, after all, should this same magnanimous government not forbid employers from insisting on the jab? Covid emergency legislation remains in place and this legislation would make it very easy for a policy of laissez faire to be enforced.

Fat chance. Fiat government seems only to go one way, against its people.

I wonder whether people understand how grievously profound the extirpation of debate is, and how appalling are any attempts to deny us our rights to speak freely, and to exercise our freedom of speech in open exchanges.

I happened to tune into a [debate on a topic of interest](#) – abiogenesis, to be precise, research into the origins and creation of life. Nothing of practical consequence hung upon the debate, but the matter intrigued me. I had expected a gentlemanly to and fro, out of which I might achieve some impetus to enhance my own thinking.

What resulted, however, was very disappointing. One of the debaters started in with ad hominem arguments, snide interruptions and sarcastic attacks, and because the moderator had not insisted upon civility, the exchange eventually devolved into an unseemly chaos of discourtesy, from both sides.

For contrast, one may watch an excerpt of a debate between Richard Dawkins and Denis Noble on the importance of genes in evolution [here](#), an exchange conducted with utmost courtesy despite clear differences of understanding.

Yet without the opportunity and ability to present to ourselves opposing ideas, what is left? Where do we go? What can we do?

The answer seems obvious: we take our guidance from Authority. How simple, and how convenient.

The suppression of genuine debate means nothing less than the suppression of independent thought.

It's every totalitarian government's dream.

If nothing else the Covid era has shown us clearly who is and who is not on the side of human freedom. My liberal friends, to my great consternation, gleefully acquiesce to authoritative control for 'the greater good'. But they do so without once having had an opportunity to hear legitimate questions and criticisms, questions and criticism that I and others raised early in 2020 about the strange and irrational measures imposed upon the people.

On the occasions when I, as a psychiatrist, had to appear in mental health court, I remember thinking how precious was the opportunity to speak freely and at length, without interruption, and how rare an occasion it represented. I tended generally to say little, and the judge would ensure that every party had its say to its satisfaction. Strange as it may appear this was an oasis of frankness and civility, and an amicable resolution was reached in virtually every instance.

If civil and courteous and open debate, the fulcrum of any decent democratically-aspiring society, is to be forbidden, regulated by misinformation monitors, and censored by self-appointed guardians in social media and government, what then is left?

Tonight (8 June 2023) I was given a shot in the arm when asked to emcee a political event in Wellington, a presentation by an umbrella party, [Freedoms New Zealand](#), that has gathered several independent parties together in pursuit of the common goals, their slogan being freedom/family/finances/future.

It was refreshing to see and hear five strong individual voices – and egos – who have agreed to unite on a basic platform to challenge the establishment Labour and National uniparty that has run New Zealand forever and that has been responsible not only for the divisive debacle of Covid management and vax apartheid, but for the sharp fall in standards of living.

I understand from the individual heads of these united parties that there have been impassioned discussions and cool resolutions worked out as a result. While the establishment government here has worked *against* its people, these forthright candidates, who have joined forces to gain a foothold in Parliament, have been able to set aside irrelevant differences for the sake of a united front, just as the various groups at the Parliament protest in 2021 did, thus demonstrating by example the virtues of discussion and debate.

May the forces of reason and unity be with them!

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*Dr. Garcia is a Philadelphia-born psychoanalyst and psychiatrist who emigrated to New Zealand in 2006. He has authored articles ranging from explorations of psychoanalytic*

*technique, the psychology of creativity in music (Mahler, Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Delius), and politics. He is also a poet, novelist and theatrical director. He retired from psychiatric practice in 2021 after working in the public sector in New Zealand. Visit his substack at <https://newzealanddoc.substack.com/>*

*He is a regular contributor to Global Research.*

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