

Why a Proper Core Curriculum is Political and Ought Not Be “Politicized”

The idea for this essay came from a question posed during a meeting of the National Association of Scholars, where several of the presentations had decried recent academic movements of the sort led by Marxists, feminists, homosexualists, or Black separatists, and complained of these groups having politicized higher education. Subsequently, a panel discussing the idea of a core curriculum featured a defense of Thomas Jefferson's model for a system based in classical republicanism and another paper arguing for a reinstatement of the traditional center of education in the ideal of developing the good citizen. Sensing an anomaly, a Princeton graduate student asked what was the difference between conceiving of the purpose of liberal education as political and abusing advanced education by politicizing it? I suggest the question deserves careful consideration, and I offer here a distinction that may guide us in thinking through the current debate on the Western canon and its place at the center of a general curriculum.

Historicist determinism requires today a temper less vulnerable to the ridicule of events than Wilsonian progressivism and a theory of determining causes less restrictive than Marx's reduction of history to changes in the means of production. The deconstructionists meet these needs with a

rainbow coalition of determinants—linguistic, religious, economic, psychological, racial, and sexual—lumping them all together under the notion of “culture.” In this sort of halfway covenant with nominalism, man is conceived as a symbol-producing animal. All the usages of civil society from manners to law, art, science, and religion defer, either consciously or automatically, to some imperious code which certifies “value” while intimidating dissent. Judgments regarding right and wrong, good or bad, noble and base make sense only in terms of the internal logic of the cultural system, not absolutely as would be the case if value judgments could be ascertained against a universal, transcendent standard. Yet the arbitrariness of every culture will come to sight in certain deep inconsistencies or contradictions if one persists in scrutinizing its underlying assumptions.

While the word “deconstruction” applies to this characteristic method of literary analysis, the substance of the deconstructionist position is cultural relativism. All cultures are equal inasmuch as all

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are equally groundless, and no culture can establish claims upon the deference of others since all standards enjoy authority only within the culture that produces them. The appeal of cultural relativism lies, it appears, in making available community without the rigors of an absolute morality. If one's fidelity reposes in his origins one may enjoy solidarity with people of similar origins, thus escaping the loneliness that would seem to follow from the doctrine that values are creations of individual preferences. Yet one is not obliged to justify the preferences of the cultural group—one upholds them just because the group upholds them.

Politicization of core requirements in the name of promoting cultural awareness is becoming a favored alternative to strengthening Western Civilization programs. It isn't generally known that after Stanford's Faculty Senate mandated the much-publicized change in the Western Civilization course a movement was initiated by the Students of Color Coalition to install an ethnic studies graduation requirement. In response to this and similar pressures, Stanford's Undergraduate Studies Dean observed that there was "likely to be a major rethinking of the distribution requirements with an eye toward incorporating more materials from traditionally excluded groups."⁶ Think of higher education as an entitlement program. Every group has its own interest in requiring set-asides to insure its slice of the pie.

At the University of California-Berkeley, a "breadth" requirement in cultural diversity was recently passed. The Berkeley faculty committee studied "ethnicity" requirements at Minnesota, Indiana, and Washington state universities before proposing a scheme that would have every student choose among courses which would treat comparatively at least three racial and cultural categories from these five: African-

American, American-Indian, Asian-American, Chicano/Latino, and European-American. The stipulation of three was decided upon in order to ensure a pluralistic emphasis, and an earlier proposal that would have required studying the cultures of color in their relation with Euro-Americanism was rejected, partly, it seems, to avoid a confrontational perspective. Yet a consequence of that decision is that the requirement, sold as a contribution to the "breadth" of the student's education, might in practice turn out to be a course that takes no account of the European contribution to America. A student would perceive a few diverse elements of the population without understanding why, for instance, Chicanos prefer to be Americans rather than preserve their language and customs intact on the other bank of the Rio Grande.

From the Committee's description of its recommendation one receives the impression that a massive truth has consistently been overlooked: namely, that the founding principles of this country, as articulated in the Declaration of Independence, look toward the opportunity of transcending racial considerations in order to focus on more worthy qualities of human nature. When Berkeley's Special Committee on Education and Ethnicity seeks to fend off the charge that their proposal encourages racism, it resorts to double-think, citing a quip like, "The way to colorblindness is through color-consciousness."⁷ What makes the innovation attractive to some faculty becomes apparent when one scans the list of courses that the Committee has already declared suitable for fulfilling the new requirement. In addition to several courses on California you will find such offerings as "Ethnic American Autobiography," "Women of Color in the United States: Race, Class, Gender and Writing," "Publishing Subcultures in the United States: A Second World War Case Study," "Narratives of

Self-Formation in Minority Writing," "United States Third World Women Writers," "Women of Color in the United States: Our Lives, Our Stories: Tools for Building Coalition," "Ethnic Identity from a Musical Perspective," "Social Work Practice with Minority Families and Children," "Poverty and Progress: Race, Gender, and Dependency."

A further indication of the tendentiousness of this material is evident to anyone who notes the contrast between course descriptions for the offerings I've just listed and the course description for one of the sensible old standards that (somehow) passed the scrutiny of the Committee, "American Literature 1820-1865." I'm not sure to whom these topics suggest the breadth of the American experience, but to observers of congressional politics the array resembles nothing so much as a typical job of logrolling. Special interest advocates already in business will be awarded a new captive market. So you can think of the politicization of core curricula as proceeding simultaneously on two fronts represented respectively by Stanford's dismantling its Western Civilization program and Berkeley's mandating ethnic studies. On the one side, the universalizing character of study in Western classics gives way to the propagation of cultural particularism, while on the other flank special pleading for minority advocates receives a boost from new general requirements in ethnic studies.

The central fallacy in such programs is well expressed by the Berkeley committee's rationale for its formation:

The concern (both nation-wide and on this campus) that led to the appointment of our committee had to do with how to represent American experience to American students. We focused on how better to understand the cultural components that created it.³

The trouble here lies in the supposition

that diversity of ethnic groups is the most important truth about the American experience. That supposition rests in turn upon an operative but unacknowledged presumption that cultural identity takes precedence over reflection and choice in shaping America. However, the uniqueness of American political institutions owes little to the influence of the racial-cultural groups the Committee identifies. The truth seems to be that the particular descendants of Europeans who determined our fundamental institutions recast something quite European and quite ancient—republican government—by devising ways to make respectable something old and European which had hitherto been held universally in disrepute: unmixed democracy. Grasping the significance of this political revolution ought to constitute an important part of any person's education. Yet Berkeley obscures that important political lesson by casting back over American history a consciousness shaped by present day political factions. Students will pay for the politicization of their curriculum to the degree that they remain ignorant of the uniqueness of their regime.

It isn't clear how cultural relativists distinguish their position from fascism. Their logic would seem to countenance boundless loyalty to and violent imperialism on behalf of one's own preferences—to the disregard or extinction of the preferences held by every other group. If every "text"—willy-nilly—procures the interests of the ethnic group, class, or sex represented by its author, self-interest would seem to advise our knowing as much as we can of the intents of the group of which we are the creature, then devoting ourselves to these interests with a premeditated single-mindedness. We are all, according to this view, class advocates, yet the knowing class advocates presumably stand to benefit more

from their "ethnocentricity" than the unknowing. If we reject the idea that a common humanity ought to take precedence over secondary differences and think instead that secondary qualities when they cohere in a group are not negotiable, then we must conclude that the natural condition of human beings is war—and we should prepare for it. Yet in fact, cultural relativists call for peace rather than belligerence and toleration of cultural diversity rather than closing ranks against outsiders.

However, to say so may concede too much to declarations of peaceableness that are tactical rather than principled in their aim. Indeed, those who would substitute samplings in cultural diversity for education in Western civilization as the core of college curricula have managed to combine a peaceable cosmopolitanism with armed advocacy. On the one hand, when cultural relativists look to the hegemony exercised by Western classics—the "canon"—they argue for a respect for diversity. The heirs of a dominant Western culture, they say, should learn the parochialism of their inherited perspective and practice toleration, if not positive appreciation, of non-Western views or of dissenting oppressed elements within the West. On the other hand, dissidents, minorities, and those from "Third World" countries are encouraged merely to be themselves. Whites are supposed to learn "sensitivity" toward the different ways of Blacks, Chicanos, and Indians, whereas Blacks, Chicanos, and Indians are encouraged to learn their roots. Males must acquire new openness toward feminist preoccupations whereas women become specialists in new programs for studying feminist preoccupations.

This double standard regarding ethnic allegiances finds its counterpart in the political setting where interest group liberalism permits racist organizations (for instance, a Black Caucus), favoritism based

on racist criteria, quotas in college admissions, and "set-asides" in government contracts. In fact, the academic phenomenon and the political arrangement appear two articulations of one creed. In politics, interest-group partisanship renounces the ideal of pursuing a common good; in the classroom, cultural relativism denies the possibility of arriving at universally applicable true propositions defining human nature and conduct in accord with such natural standards. Common to both the new racism of the politicians and the new racism of the academics is the conviction that human beings are creatures of their interests and hence incapable of ordering their affairs by a sense of the categorically just and proper. Within the conception of human dealings posited by cultural relativism and implemented by interest-group politics, liberty becomes freedom to express solidarity with one's sub-culture while equality shifts from equal opportunity to equal results, understood now as equal access to bargaining over the benefits dispensed by a centrally administered scheme of federal largesse. Both academics and politicians seek to supplant a constitutional ethos centered upon rational liberty with a demand for pluralism, a catchword which conceals relativism under the plausible guise of tolerance. A pluralism based upon racial or other passion-inciting, reason-displacing motivations must have the effect of causing political justice to appear fanciful while it promotes entrenchment of group divisions. William B. Allen has rightly detected its result in what he calls the "Lebanonization" of American society.

Let me then suggest an answer to the question posed at the outset: what is the difference between a conception of college education properly political and one improperly politicized? Education succumbs to politicization when learning reinforces par-

tisanship rather than liberating minds from the confinements of interest. Presently, academic programs guided by cultural relativism give license, albeit on an inconsistently selective basis, to partisanship by teaching that thought subserves material interests in every case, and that, therefore, intellectual differences must be understood as actually a masking of contentions, the effectual truth of which is struggle for power. Or as the editor of a recent discussion of canon formation has it: "A canon is commonly seen as what other people, once powerful, have made and what should now be opened up, demystified, or eliminated altogether. . . ."

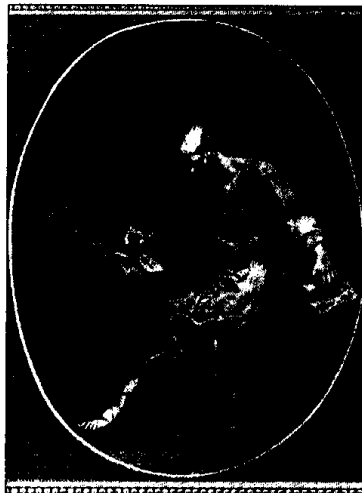
From the standpoint of classical rationalism, this view appears merely to exaggerate the truth that our first inclination is to indulge our appetite and permit our intellects to rest in the set of opinions likeliest to allow easy gratifications. However, educators once conceived, from sober observation of the strength of passion, the necessity of long training to give reason an opportunity to overcome the dictates of passion. The political application of this training produced institutions of constitutional government the study of which makes up the political content of a proper core—namely, written constitutions. Particular attention was paid to constitutions that provide for majority consent, feature separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers, and incorporate procedures that pertain to evidence, equity, and application of law as due pro-

cess. Importantly, all of these provisions protect the liberties of the minority and of every individual. These institutions also embody a certain conception of human nature. Central to that conception is the idea that individuals, not classes, possess rights the protection of which distinguishes just from unjust governments.

Furthermore, this criterion of proper government derives from the truth that the human being *qua* human, not *qua* member

of a certain race or culture, bears the dignity of a responsible moral agent. America's Declaration of Independence reverses the priority assumed by those who maintain government is the expression of a culture for a culture, since its logic establishes national independence as a deduction from universally valid principles. Americans don't deserve to be free because they have a "prefer-

ence" for certain "values," and hence "identity" as a "culture," but because mankind, as such, requires government to observe rights invested in human beings, simply by virtue of their being human. Jefferson's words look to an action undertaken on behalf of all humanity, and that is why he speaks first not of any referendum of cultural predilection but of the "laws of nature and nature's God." Hence, an education "properly political" would produce good citizens rather than partisans of cultures. It would liberate young people from partisan opinion by opening their minds to



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the dictates of nature. Of course that can only occur if we have confidence in human reason to arrive at standards of nature and then to behave in conformity to those standards. Once set awash by the academic tides I've previously mentioned, how does one reestablish such confidence?

First, we might remind ourselves of an elementary distinction: reason has two faces, the one speculative, the other practical. The first distinguishes the essences of the various categories of beings, the second governs within the soul, ordaining conduct that is accountable. These two aspects of rationality are related as principle and consequent. We conduct ourselves in accord with our understanding of how things are. Speculative reason produces science and, ultimately, philosophic understanding of first causes, while practical reason attains its end in wisdom and in the self-control wisdom establishes over the affections. What distinguishes both aspects of rationality from irrational opining is the acknowledgment both make of an obligation to offer an account.

It is precisely in this respect that Western education differs from non-Western or indeed from relativistic models of education as cultural transmission or cultural comparison. That is to say, scientific and philosophic activity proceeds by argumentation, by dialectics, by examination, and by confronting hypotheses with evidentiary challenges, all of which contrast with the prescriptive methods of inculcating cultural beliefs. Accordingly, it is difficult to treat seriously contentions that education in the Great Books must take its place as only one among many versions of cultural indoctrination. From Heraclitus on, the expressly avowed purpose of Western philosophers has been to supplant opinion with demonstrable knowledge. Even before Socrates, and certainly thereafter, philosophers ac-

knowledged their starting point in established opinion—in “culture” that is—but also recognized that the very purpose of probing accounts by dialectical argumentation was to move beyond the proximally conditioned to a grasp of the truths that might stand on their own. The only way to try out the claims of those philosophers reputed by tradition to have discovered demonstrable truths is to follow them in their demonstrations and then judge for ourselves. We learn the powers of the mind by exercising them. By critical examination of the foremost minds (especially perhaps by study of writers more removed from us in time who, because of their somewhat unfamiliar idiom, exact a more careful attention), one acquires the respect for disinterested reason that writers earn by displaying the compelling power of cogent argumentation.

Critics of Great Books programs convey the impression that they think a list of readings was set by some sort of test of doctrinal conformity. Yet agreement upon what works of the mind deserve inclusion bridges yawning doctrinal divisions. Aristotelians know that Hobbes deserves to be read in company with Aristotle, Thomists admit Nietzsche to the canon, enthusiasts of classical literature recognize comparable greatness in some modern works even though these books may explicitly repudiate classical standards. We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that to be included in lists of the great books, such as the one Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins compiled, the necessary—and the only—condition is scale of intellectual achievement, mastery indicated by such virtues as scope, perspicacity, subtlety, power to illuminate, alertness to the antithesis, and command over intrinsic requirements of form.

One gets a whiff of the alternative to relying on such criteria of intrinsic merit in

constructing lists of required readings by looking through one of the works that Stanford has added to its core for the sake of cultural diversity. Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* conducts a lengthy yet hysterical protest against colonialism and instructs colonial subjects in the necessity for violence. The following excerpt may be taken as its keynote:

The naked truth of decolonization evokes for us the searing bullets and bloodstained knives which emanate from it. For if the last shall be first this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle between the two protagonists. . . . The native who decides to put the program into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence.⁴

This book shocks not just because it advocates "absolute violence," but because it is oblivious to the need for any argument to establish principles that might justify violence or allow one to understand the sort of society Fanon wants to see emerge from the terrors required by decolonization. As you might expect, the author takes no trouble to present the case for his antithesis.

Indeed, judging from Stanford's official statement of intent to reorient its Western Culture course towards "race," "sex," and "class," one should not be surprised to see intellectual virtue sacrificed for the sake of representing the passion of solid racial identification. Evidently the demand for diversity requires a stricter ideological conformity than the old Great Books programs ever mandated because Stanford's officers go so far as to stipulate the way one must read such works as they dispense, i.e. by reference to "race," "class," "sex." They thereby ensure that students must read whatever classics remain on their list through ideological lenses that reduce the philosophical argumentation to advocacy rheto-

ric for some class or race. Every work will be read in the spirit of Fanon's. In the fight to enforce "cultural diversity" there will be much to fight about—as Fanon's war cry abundantly illustrates. Yet the tools of argumentation will not be made available, since rational appeals presuppose some standard beyond race or culture by which arguments are made binding upon all. Thus, violence is the only resort.

Whether discursive or poetic, a great book is a careful work of art: its organization perfectly articulates its substance, and the smallest part reflects the guiding conception. We come to grips with such books by bringing to bear all our capacities of reasoning and of rational imagination. We acquire some sense of the reach of the intellectual competencies of our species through those extraordinary books which, by exemplifying rational competence at its height, are the best teachers of reasoning. The current debate about the proper core curriculum could be put on a better footing if it were kept in mind that the first purpose of general education is to teach students not what, but *how* to think.

Besides learning the force of reason from observing the laws of argumentation operative within each work, one discovers, in moving from author to author in the canon, that the Western tradition is deeply divided over issues that one would expect to elicit agreement from members of the same culture. The canon does not speak with one voice regarding such questions as the existence and character of God or the possibility of divine providence, the specific difference between human beings and animals, the best way of life for human beings, the particular constitution of civil society most conducive to the best life, or the proper order of authority and subordination that should obtain among the various powers of thinking, willing, feeling, and imagining

within the individual. One doesn't study the great authors in order to learn diversity of opinion, however, but in order to enter into a controversy with a view to understanding the issues at stake so as, ultimately, to resolve them. The significant episodes of this controversy over human nature and destiny are apparent in thinkers whose thought produced distinct ways of life, e.g. in Socrates and his philosophic successors, in theological-minded thinkers, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic who in some measure appropriate, yet also in some measure reject, a classical patrimony for the guidance they find in scripture. Part of understanding the arguments developed by great books lies in grasping the world that those arguments produced. New answers to perennial questions give rise to new institutions. But this perception is the opposite of reducing thought to the epiphenomena of culture. Indeed, acquaintance with the first movers in the realm of thought tends to dispel assumptions that unconsciously operative mechanisms of culture predetermine the course of inquiry; at least among seminal thinkers received opinion and group interest can be transcended. That is why the major thinkers are major. Moreover, before students come to conclusions regarding the issues over which preeminent thinkers disagree, or even if they never conclude, they take confidence from the study of these works, confidence in the freedom of intellectual reflection. Such a course of study allows a student to acquire an intellectual integrity that disdains heading anywhere except where the argument leads. They learn to maintain this integrity by continuing beyond problems of interpretation to insist upon the further question: Is it true?

A core curriculum providing for critical reading in the great books probably is indispensable for rehabilitating confidence in the reliability of disinterested reflection for

speculative inquiry. Something further, however, may be required to reinstate a sense of reason as governor of emotions, affections, and interests. Classical moralists thought a person could not profit from study in morals if he were not well brought up. This is because habituation in the virtues is necessary when discussing prudence, moderation, courage, justice, and so forth. Families provide the first habituation in virtue, but participation in public life must complete the training. For this reason, republics were once understood to be the mode of government appropriate to free human beings as well as, simultaneously, a form of education. In republican forms of government, adults learn the scope of rationality by taking part in deliberation on law and policy. A complete political life requires giving an account of oneself and persuading in free and open debate wherein good reasons are supposed to prevail over strong feelings. The tendency of this, the most practical of instruments for schooling, is to encourage subordination of private to public awareness. A completely public manner of living, therefore, almost defines rationality in its practical, moral aspect.

Although John Dewey was convinced that people ordinarily operate from "crudely intelligized emotion," he nevertheless expressed a view of the good of republican training that seems to coincide with the traditionalist's ideal of political life as habituation to self-control:

[T]he best which most men attain to is the domination by the public weal of their other desires. What is meant by "representative" government is that the public is definitely organized with the intent to secure this dominance.⁵

Dewey was neither inconsistent nor particularly novel in extolling representative government for its rationality while generally depreciating the role of reason in human affairs. Jefferson, Madison, and the

other Founders made much of reason and the rights of humanity implicated in rational nature, not because they denied the strong influence of interest over thought but because, recognizing the sway of desire over principle, they sought to construct a political system that could make subordination of private impulse to public probity more the rule and less the exception. Their handiwork remains our nearest access to the better possibilities of our nature. Modern constitutional, democratic regimes were the first since Greece to institute provisions adequate to insure that rulers would govern in the public interest rather than for private ends and be selected for their qualifications to rule rather than be privileged with power by consideration of birth, or religion, or race.

Rights traditionally held to be the most important were precisely those liberties that permitted the citizen's participation in public affairs. The first ten amendments to the Constitution, for instance, extend to all persons immunities and privileges in large part hitherto confined in Britain to members of Parliament. Today, rights are viewed by some as charters of privacy setting up barriers behind which one retreats from the public life, and, to the extent that such a view exerts influence, we lose the experience of frequent participation in public deliberation and with it the best means of relearning the efficacy of rationality in making public policy. Privatization of rights co-exists well, however, with another obstacle to self-government, administrative centralization—a development that threatens to remove at once the inclination and opportunity of individual citizens to care for matters of general concern.

The Western world's distinctive contribution has been the tradition of controversy

best conveyed by great books. Yet, whatever their difference in other respects, the minds who produced this controversy, these books, have transmitted standards of reason regulating arbitrary will. In the most speculative recesses of the academy this central conviction finds expression in expectations of rational demonstration of any view set before students or the public. Western institutions of limited government eventually evolved public usages that sought to make similar standards operative in civil life.

These distinctive Western contributions were possible because Western thinkers considered themselves not to be bound by a culture, but bound instead to voice truths that could be perceived by anyone of any culture provided he were capable of thinking through the terms of argument. The "self-evident" truths of the Declaration become evident as soon as one grasps the connection between equal natures and equal rights. We don't know to what degree respect for rational discourse in schools depends upon experience of deliberating to the common good in representative democracies. But it isn't farfetched to suppose that cultural relativism and its political cognate, the new racism, interpose dogmas that impede access to nature in the realm of thought as they impair public spiritedness in conduct.

1. "Proposal for an American Cultures Breadth Requirement: Report by the Special Committee on Education and Ethnicity," University of California at Berkeley, March 28, 1989.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 37.
5. *The Public and Its Problems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1927), p. 76.

