

To Reform the Politically Correct University, Reform the Liberal Arts

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I don't doubt for a moment that our universities and our teaching have become thoroughly politicized—and probably in far deeper ways than the egregious examples that pop up every week in the journals and newsletters of the anti-PC stalwarts.

Still there's something a little bit odd about the picture of our current politicization: It virtually all takes place in the liberal arts, and primarily in the humanities segment of the liberal arts. I know that statement is overbroad: What about the daily indoctrination we find in schools of education and social work, for example, or in departments, like geography, that are only tangentially related to the liberal arts? I'm in no position to deny these claims. Still, when we in and out of the academy complain that our students are being indoctrinated rather than educated, our main examples all seem to come from areas like literature or history or classics or philosophy, and rarely from engineering or the mechanical arts. Or even, let me venture, from the plastic and fine arts, at least not to the extent we all see every day in English departments or, God help us, in the various sub-departmental "studies"—Women's, Gay, Chicano, and so on.

Parents and students all understand this in an almost intuitive way. We use to bemoan the existence of the "Two Cultures" in the academy—how the sciences looked down on the humanities, how the humanities couldn't speak the language of the hard sciences, and how neither could really understand the other—though none of this stopped them from being suspicious of each other or even holding each other in contempt.

Now we seem to have a different 'two cultures' around us—American citizens, ordinary people and their children on one hand, and the academic elites, especially the liberal arts elites, on the other. One side often thinks the other effete, useless, smug, and vaguely un-American. The other sometimes holds the great mass of more ordinary folk to be, well, you pick the right

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words – crass, materialistic, jingoistic, benighted, shallow, ignorant, red-necked, homophobic, racist, sexist, reactionary....

Legions of academicians will now jump to the defense of their trade and tell me that they think no such thing; or if they think it they don't say it; or if they say it, well, hell, it's true, isn't it? In any event, I'm only talking now about perceptions, not reality; and the perception on the part of the crass and materialistic is that if they want to be browbeaten by someone's political opinions, they'll watch the Sunday talk shows, thank you very much, and spend their tuition money on something that will give them a reasonable return on their investment, like electrical engineering, pre-med, or business administration. Today 47% of all students in higher education have opted to go two years to their local community college and the great majority of these do so without plans to parlay this diploma into a four year liberal arts degree. Yet isn't it odd—one hears very little about the politicization of professional or vocational education. On the other hand, while community colleges and technical and vocational education flourish, Antioch is closing its doors.

One strange part of all this is that I know that there are accountants and electricians at community colleges and teaching scientists and mathematicians in our universities who hold very strong political views and social opinions; but these views and opinions, it would seem, only rarely lend themselves to classroom proselytizing or political indoctrination.

So, what is it about the liberal arts rather than more professional, vocational or technical fields that lend themselves to be the handmaidens of indoctrination and why the humanities more than math or science?¹ I actually don't think it's that hard a question, though the remedies we might devise to overcome indoctrination in the liberal arts classroom might turn out to be more difficult than we had hoped.

But, first, let's put aside the notion that "relativism" has captured the spirit of higher education and is the cause of all our grief. I have to say, I never met a relativist in academe in all my life, at least not in the humanities and social sciences. In fact, those most bent on proselytizing their students were always the furthest away from being relativists that one could find. They know what is true and what is false, what is just and unjust, good and bad, and, to be certain, if they have their way, their students would soon know it, too. Proselytizing is, in a way, their "job." Oddly enough, as I'll try to explain later, if there are any practicing relativists in the universities, my sense is that they'll be found on the libertarian right, among the most vociferous critics of p.c., rather than on the left.

Let me say something that might seem vaguely exculpatory about the politicizers and indoctrinators I've met in our colleges, though I don't mean it that way: There actually may be something in the nature of the liberal arts that invites their misbehavior. Let's begin this way.

There are lots of ways of looking at the liberal arts. Some understandings have a more antique sound, some more contemporary. Some seem a bit banal, as when we talk of the liberal arts as those studies that make our students "well-rounded." Some don't seem to get us all that far, as when we describe the liberal arts as a collection of disciplines or fields, such as philosophy or literature, or the old trivium-quadrivium list.

What, we might then ask, sets these disciplines apart; what makes them "liberal"? Well, we've heard it said, a liberal study is one with no professional or pecuniary aim. Thus, the study of nursing is a non-liberal art, a 'servile' art (as the snooty might allow), since people do pay for its application, thinking, quite rightly, that it might have some real and practical value. The study of Restoration poetry then becomes a liberal art, since I imagine no one would pay all that much for your knowledge of it.

Abstracting from this idea of separating knowledge from labor, we are also told that the liberal arts are those studies that are fit for free men and women. Or, as we are more likely to say these days, they are those studies that help *make* us free. When asked, “In what sense do they make us free?” we sometimes hear, “Well, they free us from the opinions of others and help us come into the possession of our own minds.” The liberal arts bring us out of the cave of mere opinion – out of the cave of the myths handed down by our poets, priests, and parents – and help us approach the light of the sun, the light of things as they actually are, not as mere opinion holds them to be. That, to be sure, is an answer at a very high level. It may also have in it an insight into the problem we’re facing. More on this anon.

Let me suggest a second definition or perspective on the meaning of the liberal arts, one which builds on the cave-sun understanding, one that I believe is also true, but which also has within it a political problem: *The liberal arts are those studies that help us discover the truth about the most important human matters through reason and reflection.* To say we learn these matters through reason and reflection means we don’t learn them through authority or revelation. More importantly, this understanding of the liberal arts directs our attention to the idea that what we are about in the liberal arts isn’t some kind of adornment, isn’t the acquisition of a veneer of culture or refinement, but the study of the most important issues facing us as human beings. What might these issues be? How about such serious matters as—What is justice? What’s the relation of power to justice? How should I live? How should *we* live? What is beautiful and why? Is the universe a cosmos or is it something more random? What is love? What should I love? What should I hate? Does God exist and what does he ask of me? No one could reasonably deny that these and scores of other similar questions concern, as I put it, “the most important matters of human life.” Finally, this understanding says to us that the liberal arts aim at knowing

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the “Truth” about these matters. Not just a catalogue of different nice opinions on these matters but the actual Truth about them, as best as we humans might come to discern the truth.

Despite the push-back I often get from academics across the political spectrum when I mention this—since there’s often a feeling that I am trying in some underhanded way to impose my own view of what’s true and what’s not on them—the fact is that most professors who politicize their classrooms have a sense that this definition is not far off the mark. Hardly relativists, the reason they entered the profession in the first place was because they already saw themselves as having a certain handle on the truth and wanted to promote their vision of the matter to the next generation and all succeeding generation of students to that truth.

To use the classroom to propagandize your own views of right or social justice or faith is, of course, a highly partial understanding of what liberal arts instruction might be. It overlooks the notion that the liberal arts promise a *search* for the truth; it hardly validates the imposition of a professor’s particular understanding. The liberal arts are, moreover, *arts*, the acquisition of skills, the acquisition of various habits and facilities of mind, all in the service of more serious and substantive learning. These arts are hardly promoted by our being asked to prattle back particular answers suggested, promoted or imposed by one’s professor.

Notice, of course, that these are equal opportunity rules, rules that apply alike to all parts of the political spectrum. The religious sectarian committed to showing his students in Western Civ that everything done since the Enlightenment has been little more than a diabolical plot trying to separate men from their Creator is no less illiberal, no less political and politicized, than the shrill feminist out to prove that the history of the West is little more than the history of male hegemony and power, or the sexual enslavement of women.

While I might be tempted to give a fuller catalogue of all the horrors perpetrated these days in the name of liberal education, I don't think I can even begin. Sorry to say, while the varieties of truth may be limited, the varieties of error and ideology are infinite. Worse, while the most egregious examples make the headlines, the situation is significantly more serious because of the quiet politicization that imbues so many courses often without the professor, much less the students, seeing it. In some places, a Marxist or feminist analysis just seems natural. That's the way the professor was taught in graduate school, that's what he thinks constitutes analysis, and that's the basis on which he constructs his syllabus. He doesn't see it as political because he thinks that way of looking at the material is what professors *do*. Truly to begin to break the back of the PC university would involve reforming graduate education, reforming the nature of the PhD, and breaking the nexus between "cutting-edge scholarship" and earning a doctorate. Yet, hardly any of the foes of political correctness seem prepared to talk about this.²

Still, to go back—Even though the varieties of doctrine might be myriad, and even if most are unconventional, even inane and false, the fact is that it is precisely because they seem so eminently true and reasonable to the one professing—and present themselves as truths concerning the most important human matters!—that such politicizing finds a ready home in the liberal arts. If the liberal arts purport to help us understand the truth about the most important human matters, well then, the indoctrinator says, I have exactly what you've been looking for! Indeed, the reason I became a teacher, he or she might say, was so I could bring the truth to the great unwashed.

So, having said that the purpose of the liberal arts is to help us and our students learn better the truth about the most important matters, we should not be surprised when every rag-tag

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opinion that thinks itself true, and every ideologue who sees himself with a calling to have everyone know what he knows, comes knocking at the door of the liberal arts. It doesn't mean we shouldn't be distressed. It doesn't mean we shouldn't mightily resist. But it does mean we shouldn't be surprised.

There are, of course, those who look in horror at this anti-intellectual browbeating of students and at the constant barrage of accusations, fulminations, and even re-education classes designed to suppress opposition and lead students and recalcitrant faculty to a new 'belief.' Those who point out these horrors are among our finest professors, though, sadly, sometimes they find themselves outside the academy, looking in. Still, I've noticed that sometimes their answers are incommensurate with the problem. And some of their answers I find unhelpful. Here's where that ol' debbil 'relativism' often starts to creep in.

The problem is, we are told, that when we put our emphasis on finding the "truth," we let all kinds of ideologues, dogmatists, authoritarians, and totalitarians, not to mention outright nut-jobs, into the profession. Once we place our emphasis on truth, we are told, we should not be surprised that ideologues find a ready home in the liberal arts. Better we should put the emphasis on liberty, on freedom, on fairly absolute freedom not only of inquiry but of expression. Emphasize freedom, cultivate liberty; but de-emphasize truth, for the toll-keepers on the way to truth are the dogmatists. Besides, in making freedom not truth the core of our educational experience, it might well then turn out that real truth will ultimately win out, given the marketplace of ideas.³

Well, perhaps. Though the belief that truth will win out given a free market of ideas might itself be merely a conventional opinion, a nice hope, a dogma. For truth actually to win out might require an atmosphere of civility, rules, ordered study, requirements, and self-restraint.

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It may require the acceptance of certain conventions—for example, that reason is superior to intuition or feeling if one is truly to know—even though such conventions might ultimately be questioned. In any event, while it seems fairly clear that the truth, if approached, will make us free – that is, free from false beliefs and mere opinion—it’s not so certain that freedom will, in itself, make us wise.

All this is to say that we have a problem. We should not wish to abandon the search for truth, for wisdom, for solid knowledge of the most important human things, as the very basis of the liberal arts, even though we know that such a project seems an open invitation to proselytizers and dogmatists. Nor can we easily say that only those who are merely open, who profess nothing but ignorance, are fit teachers of the liberal arts. Some things are seemingly closed, and properly so, at least as starting points for our inquiry—for example, that incivility will not be tolerated in class, that plagiarism is theft and theft is wrong, that argument is superior to assertion, that opinion is inferior to knowledge, and that reason trumps emotion.

Still, as we probably all heard it said, in asserting that a truly liberal education concentrates on knowledge of the most important human things we have probably already made assumptions that are ineluctably political: How often have we been told “Your ‘important questions’ are not necessarily *my* important questions. Your ordering of what’s important already involves an implicit judgment of what’s better and what’s worse, of what’s worthy of study and what’s peripheral, and is therefore *intrinsically* political. When you say it’s more important to examine Shakespeare’s view of the best social order rather than homoerotic themes in Julius Caesar, you’ve made a *political* decision.” It may be that Socrates *said* he knew nothing, but we are always left with the impression, first, that he really had some inklings of what was true and what was false, and, second, in the questions he both asked and didn’t ask, he had more than just

a hunch about what was better and what was worse. Liberal education is, *per necessitate*, much like that.

Still, to say that there is an inherent and necessary bias in the liberal arts regarding the centrality of truth and its superiority over opinion merely explains why so many find the liberal arts congenial to their various brands of proselytizing. It does not excuse their indoctrination of students nor does it ever excuse their silencing serious thoughts or arguments because they're at variance with their cherished views.

I would hardly want to break the connection between the liberal arts and the pursuit of truth simply because it lends itself to corruption by those who prefer to proselytize rather than to teach. To unmoor liberal learning from the search for truth would be to make it frivolous and unimportant. Yet, if the connection of the liberal arts at their best with truth is seemingly unavoidable, despite all the troubles it brings, the connection of the liberal arts with questioning, with criticism, might bear some salutary re-thinking.

I said earlier that the liberal arts bring us out of the cave of mere opinion—out of the cave of the myths handed down by our poets, priests, and parents—and help us approach the light of the sun, the light of things as they actually are, not as mere opinion holds them to be. Who among us has not used these or similar words when describing the workings of the liberal arts? The liberal arts teach us to put all ideas to the test. The liberal arts call our traditions, our religion, our country, and our most cherished beliefs into account. “You will,” I have told incoming freshmen any number of times, “have your values questioned, your beliefs criticized, and your minds changed repeatedly over the next four years.” Yes, I have said such things, and I now repent of my having said them.

In saying that we in the liberal arts are essentially critics, essentially challengers and questioners, we begin the shallow activity of puffing ourselves up. Perhaps, we think to ourselves, we surely aren't Socrates, but if we teach our students to challenge everything, maybe we're on the way towards being a pretty fair imitation. When you think about it, it's no wonder so many decent people look askance at the liberal arts: I should pay all that money just to have my most cherished beliefs undermined, my faith cast into doubt, and my parents and country undermined? I don't think so.

Still, we persist. In order to reach the truth about the most important things, we professors pronounce that we must encourage *critical* intelligence. We think questioning, criticizing, undermining, has become our sacred duty. After all, didn't Socrates go around showing people how little they knew, pointing out the weakness in their thoughts, making a fool of everyone he met, all the better to prepare us to leave the cave of opinion and enter the light of truth? Aren't we to be like him?

Well, aside from the fact that most critical professors rarely turn their sharp pencils on their own cherished orthodoxies, the fact is this is a partial and self-serving view of the Socratic enterprise. To take Socrates at his word, the reason he would question men was *to find out what they knew*. It was the search for knowledge, not particularly the desire to undermine, that animated the questioning. To be certain, most of the people Socrates spoke with very often did not know. But it was not radical doubt that pushed Socrates but a desire to find out what people actually did know and could defend. Socrates is not Descartes.

What this means is that we who profess the liberal arts have one of the hardest but perhaps most noble of jobs—we cannot be content with being critics, we have to be searchers after the truth. Our job is not to point and ridicule or snicker but to try to understand, to try to

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learn and to *know*. Yes, Jefferson wrote that all men were created equal and, yes, Jefferson owned slaves. But what can we learn from that? Shall we read Jefferson with even greater care to see why this was so, or will we be content simply to be critical or smug? Shall we start to understand the complex political and even spiritual problem Jefferson forced himself to face when he refused to hide the fact that there were certain self-evident truths that called into question his own actions? Or is labeling Jefferson a racist good enough? Shall we try to understand what Genesis is trying to teach or will we be happier trying to undermine our students' beliefs by saying that everyone knows such writings are just myths or fables?⁴

Let me try to offer a small antidote to at least some of the varieties of indoctrination in our classrooms: Let's go back to an older understanding of the liberal arts not as the home of sophistication but of naiveté. Let us again see the liberal project as an attempt to draw from books and ideas and statesmen and philosophers all the wisdom they might contain. If we wish to be like Socrates and question everyone, let us at least be open to the answers they might give. Let us, if we see something contrary to our sensibilities, *ask why*.

Yes, Socrates questioned everybody, and this attitude of questioning seems to be so ingrained in the soul of the liberal arts that it seems almost to define the very core of the liberal arts—question everything, dispute everything, deflate everything, perhaps even degrade everything. Begin with radical doubt and see what ideas and institutions are left standing after you've called them into account. Church, family, government, charity...question them all. Having done this, then perhaps one's own views will shine.

But there's another part of Socrates that begins not with doubt but with wondering, with marveling. In what should become the paradigmatic metaphor for liberal education by my lights, those who leave the cave of ignorance and mere opinion and see objects in the light of day and as

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they really are not cynics but wonderers, marvellers. They marvel at seeing things clearly, and for the first time. There's a joy of discovery in this education, not the sadness of constant skepticism. There's a real happiness that no other earthly creature seems to be able to have, of knowing how things work, and why they work, and the reasons and arguments behind things.

Let us begin again to look at the world of learning with a kind of openness and wonder. In so doing, we will discover arguments where others might only see excuses. We will see reasons where others see only rationalizations. We might soon see the reasons for things, see the ideas behind things, see the complexity of humans and the universe, and see the limits and limitations of things. And we can do it by being open to arguments and following things through to their conclusions, and always asking important questions, not small ones.

None of this will change the mind of even one professor who thinks that deconstructing literature, debunking history, or dethroning all idols but his own is what his job is all about. But at least we can tell students that those professors who think that their views are wisdom itself are the enemies of their education. We can tell students that the purpose of a real education is to have them marvel at things they never saw before, perhaps come to a better and surer understanding of beliefs they already hold, and learn better how to think, analyze and weigh evidence so as to come into the possession of their own minds. And tell them that those who would do otherwise are not true teachers but frauds, charlatans and crooks. Or tell them you would say this, except that the thought police won't allow it.

¹ I know, I know, the new Religion of Global Warming has had some effect in some science department; but my guess is that even this issue is handled in a more rational and evaluative way in the sciences than in the more politicized, mocking, and self-righteous atmosphere of the humanities.

² See Agresto, "Narrowness and Liberality," *Academic Questions*, winter 2003-04, pp. 83-6, for an attempt to begin a discussion of graduate school and PhD reform.

³ Perhaps the best contemporary expression of this position is Kors and Silverglate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (Free Press, 1998). But see Agresto "Truth v. Liberty: A Confusion of Priorities," *Academic Questions*, summer 1999, pp. 16-20, with rejoinder by Kors and Silverglate, pp. 30-5.

⁴ In a slightly different vein, my friend Jon Moline once noted that maybe it was true that all great people had feet of clay, but that was no reason why all professors had to be foot-fetishists.