Liberal Education, the Enlightenment, and the Limits of Faith

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Liberal Education, the Enlightenment, and the Limits of Faith

The purposes of higher education range widely. They include everything from furthering fundamental research and advancing knowledge in the sciences and humanities to the preparation of students for the professions, from enhancing personal vocation to the need for training an increasingly sophisticated workforce. In this marketplace of options, it is important to remember that that form of education which we call “liberal education” was intended to embody and advance a core set of values which were systematically formulated at the time of the European Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries. Arguably, Enlightenment values provide the context within which the full variety of purposes of the university may successfully be realized.

Consider for a moment that most prosaic of documents, the Student Code of Grand Valley State University. Its opening argument reads,

"A University is charged with a specialized purpose in that it must seek, disseminate and use knowledge in pursuing truth."

The pursuit of truth is a sensitive undertaking that flourishes only under special conditions or circumstances. To create and sustain these special conditions, the academic community has long upheld these beliefs:

- That freedom of inquiry and freedom of expression are indispensable elements of academic life;
- That a thoughtful and reasoned search for truth can be conducted only in an atmosphere free of intimidation or coercion;
- That respect for the rights of others is essential;
- That tolerance for differing opinions is a fundamental requirement of the open forum.

These are sentiments that could have been comfortably penned by American political thinkers or French phi-
losophes of the late 18th century. The values here stated—freedom of inquiry in the pursuit of truth, tolerance, universal respect—are central to the Enlightenment vision. They are correlaries of its core beliefs in the moral worth and, in opposition to Christian doctrine, of the inherent goodness of each individual person. These beliefs, in turn, are grounded in our ability to reason, an ability understood to be universal across and distinctive of humanity.

Above all else, the Enlightenment emphasized the human capacity for clear, reasoned thought. It is that capacity that ultimately makes persons worthy of respect, and thus is the basis for the Jeffersonian claim in the Declaration of Independence that all humans are created equal. The ability to reason legitimates the human right to freedom in both its forms, as both freedom from coercion by external authority (typically, the state and the church), and freedom to pursue happiness. Indeed, unless it can be assumed that persons are capable of thought that is both dispassionate and objective, there is no basis for granting them autonomy.

From this initial assumption of the universality of reason, a variety of values follow which we accept as so basic to the fabric of American society that our culture would be unrecognizable without them. These include trust in democratic forms of government, since each person can be granted the ability to participate responsibly in the political process, and tolerance in matters of belief. The primitive forms of thought, for it follows that persons capable of reason ought to have the prerogative to arrange their personal lives in a manner that makes the most sense to each of them individually.

With respect to the place of the university in civic life, Americans value education as a means through which persons may acquire both accurate knowledge about the world and the method through which further knowledge may be obtained. Rather than bemoaning the difficulties of existence, the pursuit of knowledge, particularly through the organized forms of science and technology, allows humans to become, as Freud put it, “prosthetic gods,” armed by civilization against illness, bodily decay, and the harshness of nature. The Hobbesian characterization of life as “nasty, poor, brutish, and short” has been transformed by increasing measures of material prosperity, while his “war of all against all” has been substantially ameliorated and, through political arrangement and community, treated and palliated for many of the citizens. The enrichment of the material and social circumstances of life, though it were itself insufficient to lead to moral and spiritual growth.

Of course, the origins of these values can be traced to a variety of forms associated with the medieval European philosophy in the 15th and 16th century political, economic, and religious contexts. The fall of the Roman Empire and the intermediacy of the Christian Reformation of the 16th century were both transformative of the individual person, and the spread of print and the organization of the European mind were crucial in the spread of principles.

All of these transformations of the Europe of the 15th century, the achievements of a spread of scholarship stood the foundations of internecine religious conflict of the Reformation, and the initial intransigence of transnational religious and political conflict, threatened by ostensibly conduct the practice of faith by definition. This is no way to resolve the conflict. Thus, such conflicts, though part of the Enlightenment tradition, the Enlightenment tradition was one in which spiritual progress toward the archetypal threat of divine punishment.

In our own day, the appropriate demarcation of this increasingly blurred and shifting number of the Federalists, Washington, John Adams, and in the number of persons, many today might be considered liberal was accused of being a liberal (with the exception of 1800). The
the values here stated are truths, tolerance, which the Enlightenment promoted. Two core beliefs in the Christian doctrine, of the individual person. These MB1021: The Renewal of Liberal Education (Spring 2013)

The values here stated are truths, tolerance, which the Enlightenment promoted. Two core beliefs in the Christian doctrine, of the individual person. These are indiscernible by reason; therefore, a Deist belief system proved to be speculative. Any efforts to further specify them would lead to undecided conflict. The Enlightenment hope was that such material and social progress (sometimes capitalized as though it were itself a form to worship) would ultimately lead to moral and spiritual growth as well.

Of course, the Enlightenment had deep roots. Its origins can be traced back to the rational habits of inquiry associated with the emergence of modern science and philosophy in the 16th and 17th centuries; to the 17th century political revolutions in England, resolved through a reasonable allocation of power between monarch and Parliament; to the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, with its conviction that each individual person could know divinity directly, without the intermediacy of the Church; to the voyages of discovery of the 15th and 16th centuries, which awakened the European mind to the varieties of human culture; to the spread of print-based literacy after Gutenberg.

All of these tendencies came to a critical mass in the Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries. The nascent achievements of reason-based inquiry in science and scholarship stood in sharp contrast to the legacy of internecine religious war spurred by the Counter-Reformation, and of the political absolutism that was initially offered as a means to supercede both local and transnational religious violence. Such warfare had been ostensibly conducted over doctrines of faith, but matters of faith by definition are beyond human reason. There is no way to resolve them, short of universal revelation. Thus, such conflict represented the height of folly for Enlightenment thinkers. Instead, the Enlightenment vision was one in which humanity could achieve spiritual progress through reasoned inquiry, without the threat of divine punishment or sectarian violence.

In our own day, when the lines marking the appropriate demarcation between religion and politics seem increasingly blurred, it might be useful to recall that a number of the Founding Fathers—Franklin, Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Madison—subscribed to a variety of forms of rationalized Christianity that many today might find to be heretical (as Jefferson was accused of being by the Federalists in the election of 1800). The most stringent of these was Deism, whose purpose was precisely to set the appropriate boundaries of human reason in matters of religion so as to avoid the possibility of religious conflict arising over doctrines of faith. Deists, though Christian, sought guidance as much from the Book of Nature as from the Bible. The Bible was unreliable, derived from authority and filled with passages that were subject to conflicting interpretation, but the Book of Nature revealed order and regularity in the reign of universal law, and hence, a clear configuring of the intentions of a reasonable Creator. The tenets of Deism were understood to be truths available to reason, truths that all Christians could acknowledge. For instance, from the fact of the Creation, one could infer that there must be a Creator; from the orderliness of nature, one could infer that the Creator is good, powerful, and reasonable; from the evidence of nature's conformity to God's will in universal law, one could infer that humans should live virtuously, in obedience to His intent; from the fact that there is injustice in a world created in goodness, one could infer that there must be eternal reward and punishment in an afterlife. But beyond these basic truths, theological inquiry became speculative. Any efforts to further specify God's nature or intentions are indiscernible by reason; therefore, they should be avoided, lest they give rise to undecided conflict.

While the intellectual rigor of a Deist belief system proved to be too emotionally unsatisfying to gain widespread popular support, the very spareness of its doctrine testifies to the dangers that were perceived to lie within religious passion. The renewal
of that passion in public life in America over the last 30 years, as well as the resurgence of religious fundamentalisms around the world, has once again placed the question of the relations of faith and reason at the heart of national life and international politics. The dangers of ideological prejudice and parochial dogma are as real today as they were in the past. In such a climate, where an appeal to reason is often the last rather than the first of alternatives, Enlightenment values continue to be vital safeguards against the reign of ignorance and intolerance.

The purposes of contemporary education do indeed vary widely, but it remains true that supporting the freedom and autonomy of the life of the mind, the life of unconstrained and responsible inquiry, continues to be the core value of the university. It is that value that liberal education at Grand Valley seeks to enhance.

A Student’s Perspective

Three years ago I was a university student, and I was excited. Perhaps I was engaged in a sort of intellectual running relays together. As anyone affiliated quickly disappointed, the year was not an academic to be a long forgotten overgrown.

There are many between my expectations of them lie within the active imagination, the changing dynamics. Enrollment in consistently on the although this suggests on higher education site. Students and perceived a necessary step to Thus, it becomes not the extension of the education a means to an end.

Very few students life, but instead see in any other occupation would be hard pressing forming anywhere matter how hard org try, intellectual ended looked down on. It roll one's eyes at that out a sigh of relief at parties, for the most sions raging over the job, and work is not.

This view, although undermine the function of education. No long knowledge, but are giving the atmosphere.