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Liberal Education and Liberal Dogma

BENJAMIN G. LOCKERD, JR.

In *Christianity and Culture*, T. S. Eliot recounts Coleridge's warning that certain nineteenth-century educational reforms would turn education into mere instruction. A century later, Eliot confirms the realization of Coleridge's prophecy and makes his own prediction as to the next phase of educational reform:

This revolution has been effected: to the populace education means instruction. The next step to be taken by the clericalism of secularism, is the inculcation of the political principles approved by the party in power. (33)

I am not ready to admit that Eliot's dire prophecy has come true, but the establishment of required courses in "multiculturalism" at colleges around the country is a sign that it may, for these courses do seek to inculcate the political principles of the party in power on American campuses (if not in Washington). One of my colleagues said when some political subject arose a few years ago, "Well, I assume we are all liberals." The proposal for "multicultural" education currently before the faculty at Grand Valley State University, like similar ones elsewhere, makes this same assumption and intends to turn our students into liberals too. Genuine liberal thinkers, such as Arthur Schlessinger and C. Vann Woodward, have seen the contradiction inherent in this project and have denounced it. These people can distinguish between their commitment to liberal political views and their commitment to liberal education. I write this to urge my colleagues at Grand Valley State University and my colleagues across the country to be clear about that distinction and to reject proposals for separate required courses in "multiculturalism" (a word which I must place in quotation marks, since those who bandy it about have not defined it).

A year ago I taught a course called "Introduction to Liberal Studies," the text for which is a collection of essays edited by Professor Stephen Rowe of our philosophy department. As I attempted to lead the students through this collection, I was surprised at how little thought I myself had previously given to the concept of liberal education. What I learned while teaching this course makes it clear to me that required diversity education is inimical to liberal education.

Mark Van Doren gives what is, to my mind, the best beginning definition in Rowe's anthology because he approaches it by speaking of the "liberal arts" which

liberal education fosters. He contrasts these with the useful or practical arts (such as farming, carpentry, or metalworking) and also with the fine arts (such as music, painting, and poetry). "The liberal arts," Van Doren says, "are the specifically intellectual arts, and therefore are keys to all of man's operations as man" (42-3). He is thinking, of course, of the traditional definition of man as *homo sapiens*, man the knower. This capacity for intellectual knowledge enters into the practical and fine arts, to be sure, but the liberal arts are those whose aim is simply knowledge, not practice. We seek knowledge because that is what we do as human beings, and because seeking that (admittedly elusive) goal makes us more fully human. In this sense the liberal arts (including natural sciences) are humanistic. Aristotle says at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* that people are by nature curious, and this essential truth is so obvious that it comes to be unconsciously parodied by purveyors of gossip rags who proclaim that "Inquiring minds want to know." (Deconstructionists who have by now pegged me for a naive essentialist need misread no further.)

Van Doren proceeds to identify the liberal arts. They are essentially only two: language and mathematics (43). Natural language is the art of knowing (or tool of knowing, if you prefer) practiced by scholars in the humanities; mathematics is the art of knowing practiced by natural scientists. Van Doren wrote this before social science claimed to be a separate and equal domain. That claim may be based on the social scientist's combination of linguistic and mathematical (i.e. statistical) ways of knowing. The two liberal arts have different functions: natural language names the qualities or kinds of things; mathematical language names the numbers or amounts of things (45). All the specialized disciplines in the modern liberal arts curriculum refine our use of one or the other (or both) of these two symbolic systems.

It is instructive to recall, as Van Doren does, that the less specialized curriculum of the medieval universities was broken down into two divisions corresponding to language and mathematics. The trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) was the entirety of the undergraduate curriculum and taught linguistic disciplines; the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy) taught mathematical disciplines to graduate students. This division into language disciplines and mathematical disciplines goes back to ancient times. It is reflected today in the three R's taught at the elementary level: readin' and writin' are linguistic; 'rithmetic is mathematical (Van Doren 49). At the college level there are only two courses we require all students to take: English Composition and Algebra. We recognize that these two are the fundamental intellectual disciplines that make all the others possible.

Now, even in the theologically-oriented medieval universities, religion was not added as another R-subject (though theology was certainly assumed to be the ultimate concern of all scholars). And even if we turn to Cardinal Newman we find him explicitly rejecting the suggestion that the deliberate end of liberal learning (even at a Catholic university) should be religious and moral formation. He insists "that it is as real a mistake to burden it [liberal knowledge] with virtue or religion as with the mechanical arts" (90). Newman declines to use liberal education at his ideal

Catholic university as a means of inculcating Christian virtues and ideals because he sees that liberal education, by definition, does not inculcate values. It is free inquiry, with no end but knowledge. It refines the mind but does not make one good: "Liberal Education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentleman" (90). And by "gentleman" he means a person with a "cultivated intellect" (90).

The definition of liberal education elaborated by Van Doren and Newman is not compatible with what has been proposed at Grand Valley State and elsewhere. We need diversity education, one of its proponents told me recently, because students of different races are not getting along with each other. This is a problem, and it reflects a serious problem in the whole country and the whole world; but it is not a problem liberal education will solve. The doctors of diversity propose a major revolution in liberal education, the addition of a third basic discipline without which one could no longer pretend to be an educated person. In addition to English Composition and Algebra, they would require that every student take a course on the subject of diversity. There would then be four R's instead of three, four absolutely essential intellectual tools: Readin', Writin', 'Rithmetic, and Race Relations.

If we accept Van Doren's or Newman's definition of liberal learning, this new course will not fit. It seeks not intellectual but social ends. It seeks to make students good (of course only in the limited sense of making them tolerant of others, since that is the only moral principle many of the diversifiers recognize as valid and universal); it seeks to make students sensitive (the highest of all virtues, now that fortitude, temperance, and the rest are *passé*). Hence this course has a practical, moral aim: it would attempt to produce right thinking, not refined thinking.

We may wish to argue with Newman and say that liberal education does tend to produce good people. Many of our parents were generally intolerant of other ethnic and racial groups, and many of us became more tolerant through our studies of philosophy, history, foreign language, and all the other disciplines of free inquiry. But if liberal education had this beneficial effect on us it was not because our teachers designed it to do so. They taught about what seemed fascinating and important to them within their disciplines. Liberal education, if it does have good effects on the heart, does so indirectly. If we try to make it into an instrument of moral and social change it will not work and it will not be itself.

"Culture" is an important word for those trying to define liberal education, but they do not use it in the same way the multiculturalists do. Leo Strauss writes,

The finished product of a liberal education is a cultured human being. "Culture" (*cultura*) means primarily agriculture; the cultivation of the soil and its products, taking care of the soil, improving the soil in accordance with its nature. "Culture" means derivatively today chiefly the cultivation of the mind, the taking care and improving of the native faculties of the mind in accordance with the nature of the mind. (51)

Here again is Newman's "cultivated intellect." Alfred North Whitehead uses the word "culture" in the same way when he says that "Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling" (108). And of course these thinkers are echoing Matthew Arnold's definition of culture as the study of "the best that has been thought and said." Granted, this cultivation does involve inculturation in the social sense, but that is not its primary aim. One does not study the Western tradition to become an orthodox, card-carrying Eurocentrist, but to join what Strauss calls "the community of the greatest minds." (Yes, this notion is elitist, and the egalitarian reader can now discount everything I am saying—unless you give higher grades to some students than to others, or unless you believe in admissions standards, in which case you too, *hypocrite lecteur*, are an elitist.)

This community of minds, this intellectual culture, is not at all the monolithic canonical club the doctors of diversity pretend it is. As Strauss says, "the community of the greatest minds is rent by discord" (51). Such is the dynamic and diverse culture to which a liberal education should introduce us. As Strauss admits, this culture cannot exist entirely apart from particular cultures, but its vision is universal. Most of the proponents of diversity education deny that any such high culture of the mind is remotely possible. Some of them are fond of uttering half-truths (or rather quarter-truths) such as "All knowledge is a social construct." Most of them are ordinary cultural relativists who believe that all cultures and all cultural achievements are equal in every respect except that some cultures are more powerful and dominate others. This is, I suppose, what they mean when they say "everything is political": in their Nietzschean world, raw power is the only determinant. In this view, one seeks knowledge because it too is power, great power. All of the talk among the philosophers about seeking knowledge out of curiosity, simply because that is what one does as a human being, is a clever cover for the philosophers' will to power. For now, let us not argue with this view of life, but let us note that it is fundamentally incompatible with liberal education in that it rejects the definition of man with which liberal education begins.

If we seek knowledge because it is our nature to do so, that knowledge will be sought for itself, not because it will change us. Newman writes, "... that alone is liberal knowledge, which stands on its own pretensions, which is independent of sequel, expects no complement, refuses to be *informed* (as it is called) by any end, or absorbed into any art, in order duly to present itself to our contemplation" (84). More recently this view was expressed by the late A. Bartlett Giamatti (Spenserian scholar, president of Yale, and Commissioner of Baseball): "Ideas, embodied in data and values, beliefs, principles, and original insights, must be pursued because they are valuable in themselves and because they are the stuff of life" (142).

When we talk about seeking knowledge for its own sake, we seekers of liberal learning are sometimes derided and told to come out of our ivory towers. We are challenged to concern ourselves with matters that are relevant to ordinary, day-to-day life. We may respond in two ways. We may argue that solutions to practical

problems often result from our contemplations, as they do in fact. We might even go so far as to say that when we attempt to solve a problem directly we are usually less successful than when we allow the solutions to arise from the pursuit of knowledge. I remember the reaction of one of my biology professors when, in the early 1970s, money began to be taken from primary biological research and put into cancer research. He angrily maintained that cures would come faster through basic research than through applied research. Similarly, genuine respect between people of different races is more likely to come from liberal education than from training in liberal doctrine. The other answer we can give to our pragmatic compatriots, however, is that whether it gets results or not we must engage in free inquiry and teach our students to do the same, because to do so is to become more fully human, and that is a good in itself. The "liberal" in liberal education means this, and only this: free inquiry which seeks knowledge for its own sake. A diversity course aimed at producing right thinking and right action in our students does not seek to foster free inquiry and does not belong in a liberal arts curriculum.

Part of the problem with the doctors of diversity is that many of them do not believe an individual human being has any intrinsic value, for they are accustomed to thinking of people as statistics or as producers or consumers or members of victimized groups. This way of thinking leads to much curricular change because a curriculum change can presumably change whole groups of people and eventually change society. The professors of liberal learning, on the other hand, delight in the growth of each student's mind. Newman aims to foster in students a "philosophical habit" (not to be confused with the currently fashionable "critical thinking," which one sometimes also sees turned into the verb "to critically think"). Russell Kirk argues that the purpose of a liberal education is "to order the human soul" (80). Donald Levine proposes that even martial arts can be taught in a liberal manner if they are learned "for the sake of perfecting oneself as a human being and for acquiring a kind of culture that is intrinsically valuable" (150). There is that notion of intrinsically valuable culture again. "Multiculturalists," who do not really believe in such a thing, wish to create a forum in which various "disempowered" cultures can show that they are just as good as the "empowered" one. They deny that there is any one intellectual culture we all can share. They deny that liberal education exists, as they deny that human nature exists.

The proposal before us now at Grand Valley State University is the best of its type that I know of. What is so good about it is that it carefully spells out what diversity education should not be. According to our committee's recommendation, it should not be relativistic, deconstructive, remedial, or expiatory. It should not indoctrinate our students but should allow them to "think critically" about an important social issue. These are all the warnings the guardians of liberal education have been sounding, and we must feel grateful to have had our concerns acknowledged more clearly than they have been elsewhere.

It will seem, then, ungrateful and uncompromising if we criticize the proposal, but

the very inclusion of all these caveats leaves us wondering. When did you last see a course proposal which began with so many warnings? What sort of a course proposal would need to define so carefully what the course should not do? The answer, of course, is that the course needs so many negative definitions because it is essentially a politically motivated course which would invite abuse and become most of the things the proposal tells us it is not to be. A final rhetorical question: whom would you trust to teach such a course?

When we turn from the negative definitions to the positive ones, the “Aims” and “Common Elements,” we find that the proposal is much less able to define what the course *would* be. The first principle is “openness,” and even though it is duly followed by “definiteness,” the terms are so abstract that we are left with openness alone, no definition. The committee’s decision not to attach a sample syllabus makes this avoidance of definition yet more obvious. Such an open description would allow individual instructors to do virtually whatever they wanted with the course, with nothing to prevent their turning it into all the things the recommendation has said it should not be. The only part of the proposal which really gives an idea of what the course would be is the bibliography, and it is clearly a bibliography for a course in remedial race relations and Europhobia.

I have one more criticism of the rationale given by our proposal—one which comes before the others, one I and others have made before, only to be ignored. The diversifiers have failed to show two things essential to any proposal, especially one as radical as this. First, they must show that there is a significant problem with the curriculum as it stands. Are we in fact failing to deal with either the abstract question of unity-in-diversity or the practical issue of race relations? Second, they must show that their plan is the best way of addressing the problem. If it is not being done well within the curriculum, could it be, and would that not be better than creating a separate course?

Even this challenge begs a fundamental question: Is *any* curricular solution the best way of dealing with the specific problem of race relations? Would the taxpayers’ money not be spent more effectively on recruitment, scholarship, and mentor programs which help non-white students succeed and become integrated? (I am aware that this suggestion is redefined by some as “blaming the victim.” By what species of *post-novum organum* anti-logic “helping” can be translated into “blaming,” I do not know.) It seems to me that this last should be our first solution, and I cannot help feeling that the doctrinaire approach of curriculum revision reflects a comfortable sort of liberalism which prefers preaching to action. As I think about it, Holden Caulfield’s favorite word comes to mind: phony. Smug, empty gestures change nothing—least of all, minds.

At Grand Valley State there is a general tacit agreement that a separate course in diversity is not a very creative idea. “But,” people are saying, “we must do *something*.” I approve of doing something. I want to challenge my colleagues, and myself, to work with non-white students, preferably beginning while they are still in high

school. Our university, for example, might adopt one of the Grand Rapids inner city high schools and establish some type of college prep program there. Some such programs have already begun, and they seem an excellent way of recruiting lower-class and non-white students. Let us do something truly radical, not make an expiatory curricular sacrifice.

If we want curricular change that will really change people, let us increase the requirements for the types of courses that changed many of us when we first discovered the astonishing unity-in-diversity of a liberal education. Require world history, American history, foreign language, geography, political science, anthropology, American literature, art history, and music history.

As an example of how ivory-tower education leads to appreciation of otherness, I would like to recall how learning the Spanish language led me to a love of things Spanish and Hispanic, whether it was the art of El Greco or salsa of my own making or the Mexican-American family I worked with on the all-night shift cleaning up the meat-packing plant back in Wyoming. My once-impressive command of the language led me eventually to a party with several Venezuelans and Columbians in Mallorca—a night of listening to Columbian writers Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Plinio Mendoza, who went on for hours about the revolutions of their youth and the artistic creations of their maturity. Given my experiences, I am taken aback when the diversifiers claim that our foreign language classes do not give students any real understanding of foreign cultures. Certainly we could give them more immediate experiences of foreign culture than language study gives, but there would never be any real depth to those experiences. A liberal education gives students the linguistic equipment that makes genuine inter-cultural experience possible.

If we try to use academic courses to address directly the social and political problems of our time, we will inevitably fail because we will be abandoning our charge. Liberal education is most radical in its effects on the mind when it is least practical and relevant. A direct connection to practical concerns is the death of free inquiry and will produce only anger and conformity, not *metanoia*.

At a faculty forum in November, proponents again ignored these arguments. It seems to be sufficient, in the minds of the diversifiers, to point out that the proportion of non-whites in our nation is increasing; ergo, we must have this course. Again, there seems to be some new system of logic at work here. Such assertions tend to be followed by platitudes. At our forum someone said, "If we fail to plan, we are planning to fail." Reasoning aside, this common assertion makes it clear that diversity education is intended to respond to a practical social reality. Whatever knowledge might be discovered in Diversity 101, it would not be sought for its own sake.

At our faculty forum, several supporters of the proposal made explicit their intention of having the course take on the very expiatory, remedial role the proposal ruled out. They also wanted to make sure that all victimized groups would be represented. One professor was concerned that "gender" issues had not been included in the course design. Another reminded us that no course in "multicul-

turalism” should neglect to deal with homosexuality, confronting the rampant homophobia in our conservative region of the country. Another intended to use the course to enlighten her poor benighted students by informing them that “Not everyone is white, Christian, and married to the same person for their (sic) whole life.” It soon became evident that many of the people who spoke had not understood, or were rejecting, all the negative definitions the proposal had carefully given. In their hands, the course would instantly become a remedial indoctrination in relativistic attitudes. The comments about divorce and homosexuality make it evident that the speakers would not stop at political indoctrination but would attempt to change the moral beliefs of their students. The only critical thinking that would be allowed in their sections of the course would be thinking critical of our traditions of ethics, religion, and justice. As for the philosophical habit, it is not in their domain: they are doctors of dogmatism, not doctors of philosophy. These are the people who would step forward eagerly to teach Diversity 101.

At Grand Valley State the committee charged with proposing the course has tried to avoid having it turn into a free-for-all of victimized groups clamoring to reform white male students. But the very act of proposing a separate course whose fundamental purpose is to change social attitudes, in response to problems in the dormitories and changing demographics, places that course outside the range of liberal education and delivers it into the hands of a few dogmatic liberal catechists who are ready to undertake our students’ re-education. The majority of our faculty are liberally-educated people who will, I trust, reject the proposal in a faculty referendum if it comes to be approved by the governing bodies.

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