Acad. Quest. (2015) 28:408–416
DOI 10.1007/s12129-015-9525-9

Civilizing Places

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Published online: 2 November 2015
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As I write I am about to start my fiftieth year teaching at Colorado College, a liberal arts college. My formation in the 1950s was at Kenyon College, a classic liberal arts institution with a traditional curriculum strongly emphasizing the great works of the Western tradition. That experience was the catalyst for my decision to pursue an academic career in an undergraduate liberal arts college, and to perpetuate what I understand liberal learning to be. This remains my commitment.

Kenyon began as an Episcopal institution affiliated with the Episcopal Church, including a seminary, Bexley Hall, which in the nineteenth century was as important as the college. In the twentieth century the college increasingly defined the institution and eventually in 1968 the seminary left Gambier, Ohio, to join a union of seminaries of various denominations in Rochester, New York. When I entered Kenyon chapel was still required. A substantial number of students and faculty had either active or at least friendly relations with the Anglican tradition, which was not "secular humanist," but also not sectarian. During my time at Kenyon required chapel was abolished and it is fair to say that since then the college has evolved to some degree in the ways described by Patrick J. Deneen in "After the Interregnum,"[1] but (and here I speak of both Kenyon and Colorado College) not quite to the extreme he thinks is true of higher education in general. There is increasing political correctness without

[1]Patrick J. Deneen, "After the Interregnum," *Academic Questions* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 368–75.

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question, and there is (unavoidably, and within reason, justifiable) concern for the practical necessities of life after college. But there are significant numbers of students who come to liberal arts colleges wanting something more or learn of that possibility when they get there. I know such students and I cannot imagine Deneen does not encounter them, too. Predictions of the demise of the liberal arts are not new. I heard them when I was an undergraduate. Predictions of the disappearance of residential colleges in favor of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) now abound. So far these institutions persist, yet Deneen is right about the "crisis of the humanities" and the perils of politicization.

Deneen argues that the era of the great books undergraduate program (roughly the first two thirds of the twentieth century) was a short-lived, unstable interval (he labels it, following Anthony T. Kronman, "secular humanist")[2] between the "age of piety," which emphasized responsible liberty through formation of character and inculcation of virtue grounded in the classical/Christian tradition, and a post-liberal arts period favoring the "research ideal," caught up with ideological commitments to political correctness and hedonistic quests for autonomy and careerism. The humanities are in crisis. Deneen ascribes this to loss of moral consensus and the dominance of the technocratic legacy of Baconian rationalism.

In "Against the Great Books," Deneen does not so much oppose great books as the secular humanist intellectual atmosphere in which such books were celebrated (the Bible "as literature"). He points out that books, no matter how great, do not necessarily speak for themselves or disclose their true meaning if there is no respect for them as living voices of a larger tradition they instantiate. Abstracted from that tradition they become objects of clever manipulation from perspectives putatively superior to them. If they are disembedded from the moral imagination of the classical/Christian tradition, they become mere artifacts (museum pieces) of what is over and done with, or mere steps on the way to the "superior" understanding of "progressive" interpreters. He remarks, "An education in great books was itself a consequence of a philosophical worldview, and not merely an education from which we derived a worldview (much less sought an education in critical thinking)."[3] Deneen is distinguishing a heritage that once guided us from its descent into a disordered conglomeration of resources for exercising our claim of autonomy, denying responsibility to preserve or respect the ancient heritage of liberal learning.

[2]Anthony T. Kronman, *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Are Giving Up on the Meaning of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[3]Patrick J. Deneen, "Against the Great Books: Questioning Our Approach to the Western Canon," *First Things* (January 1, 2013), http://www.firstthings.com/article/2013/01/against-great-books.

However, such books remain the most expressive and engaging gateways to the heritage Deneen cherishes (as do I). There are plenty of students who are responsive to them, provided they actually hear about them and are allowed to read the books directly, not filtered through a "theory" of what the reader must find in them. Yet the variety in the great books reveals that the authors of those works do not agree among themselves; the greatest thinkers do not all say the same things, and the issue of how to read books is no less contested (we are reminded, for instance, of the difficulty posed by the distinction between the "exoteric" and the "esoteric" expressions in works both ancient and modern). These are not new issues; they have in many ways become a part of the tradition. Deneen does not address in detail the fact that the Western tradition is, and has been for a long time, highly complex and internally tension-ridden. Of course, he knows this, but his response implies distinguishing what properly belongs to the tradition and what does not.

Deneen is right that the twentieth-century emphasis on great works arose as a way to constrain the conflicts created by the demise of religious and moral agreement (illustrated, for example, in Matthew Arnold), but it could not avert the "crisis of the humanities." The works of Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Kant, J.S. Mill, and others cannot be excluded from the list of great books. We should recognize that those authors understood themselves to be dialectically engaged with their classical and Christian predecessors. We are not predetermined to think that they have simply emerged victorious over the ancients. However, that is the predominant view in the academy today, which reflects the prevalent assumption of historicism. The refusal to acknowledge that there is a dialogue within the great tradition is what needs serious reflection and discussion. Deneen is not sanguine about the prospects of reopening the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns. He places his hope in the saving remnant of the few religiously affiliated colleges that struggle to exist as oases in a new dark age. He does not say that we should abandon the contemporary university, but this is a possible implication of his diagnosis.

Deneen argues that what is really at stake is a conflict between two differing conceptions of what it means to be free, leading to opposed views on what "liberal" education—the education of individuals in the responsibilities of freedom—is supposed to teach us. The Aristotelian/Christian inheritance, which is the heart of Deneen's position, understands freedom as conduct in conformity with the right or objective order of moral virtue. He invokes the Aristotelian/Thomistic understanding of what is right by nature, reinforced by revelation. The perilous alternative is the technocratic combination of the regulatory power of government with the reign of putative technical experts who foment radical

transformation of social life and for whom the residue of the classical/Christian tradition is the stumbling block to their complete control of our future. The "research ideal" of the contemporary university, which marginalizes interest in or even comprehension of traditional liberal learning, exemplifies this and is increasingly politicized.

The great books, if separated from the animating tradition of Western civilization, have no defense against this development, which denies that there can be a right answer to the question how we ought to live. Deneen writes in "After the Interregnum":

> The classical and Christian conception understood liberty to be a form of self-control and self-governance, and thus stressed the inculcation of virtue and the formation of character through self-discipline and self-command over the appetites. The modern and liberal understanding of liberty is largely conceived as the absence of external restraints upon the achievement of wants and desires, and thus seeks to overcome obstacles to the achievement of individual ends and goals.[4]

And in "Against the Great Books:"

> This latter conception of liberty does not seek merely to coexist alongside an older conception, but requires the active dismantling of this idea of liberty and hence the transformation of education away from the study of great books and toward the study of "the great book of nature" with the end of its mastery.[5]

And in "Science and the Decline of the Liberal Arts," he argues that modern man is "subject to a kind of ungovernable hubris," whereas the older tradition fostered an "ethic of humility."[6]

In short, the study of the great books is insufficient. Something else is required in addition. I think Deneen is right about that. The problem is that once the tradition has been ruthlessly, if ignorantly, questioned—as it has been and continues to be—innocent participation in that tradition is no longer possible. It must be reconstructed, inevitably in abstraction from its wholeness, as a response to the challenges it now faces and cannot elude, in

[4] Deneen, "After the Interregnum," 372.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Patrick J. Deneen, "Science and the Decline of the Liberal Arts," *New Atlantis* (Fall 2009/Winter 2010), 61, http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/science-and-the-decline-of-the-liberal-arts.

some respects challenges the classical tradition did not have to address. Defending the tradition unavoidably becomes an argument in an antagonistic and competitive environment. Whatever else might be said of the great books approach, it was certainly motivated to achieve something like that reconstruction. (Consider the Hutchins/Adler project at the University of Chicago and its offspring at St. John's College). Even if this approach is inadequate, we need to preserve it as respectful attention to those books that continue to expose their readers to the possibility of looking beyond their circumstances to discover what a dialogue about the most important questions actually could be. Rethinking modernity is less likely to occur in those who are not exposed to them.

Oakeshott and Liberal Learning

One of the most powerful advocates of liberal learning in our time was Michael Oakeshott, and it is worth considering his response to the issues Deneen addresses, all of which he knew. Oakeshott, like Deneen, was a critic of Baconian and Cartesian rationalism, and he spoke poetically and powerfully in defense of the traditions of liberal learning. He was skeptical as well of great books programs, not because he denied that there are great works, but because he was a skeptic about programmatic solutions to civilizational issues that, in our era, treat great works ideologically. He saw that the treatment of such works had become politicized, with philosophic inquiry having been replaced by ideological disputes. He saw that it was becoming nearly impossible to discuss historical and philosophical works without debating whether they are "democratic," "socialist," "conservative," "liberal," "progressive," "sexist," "gendered," and so on. The rhetoric of "isms" is the enemy of philosophic inquiry and serious discussion.[7] An excellent current statement of this derangement is Roger Scruton's "The End of the University."[8]

Oakeshott was a profound student of the Western tradition, but he did not look to return to a past benchmark. He defended our heritage, but he also saw that we must appropriate that heritage to our circumstances as a means to rise above those circumstances. He expressed his defense of liberal learning

[7]See Michael Oakeshott, "The Study of Politics in a University," in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 194–218.

[8]Roger Scruton, "The End of the University," *First Things* (April 2015), http://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/04/the-end-of-the-university.

most eloquently in his 1975 lecture, "A Place of Learning."[9] His writings on liberal education express the romance of self-discovery (in my experience, students respond to his writings precisely because of this).

Oakeshott saw liberal learning as an adventure in setting forth to learn how to lead a fully human life. This involves "the intelligent activity in which a man may understand and explain processes which cannot understand and explain themselves" (3). Freedom, he wrote, "lies not only in his ability to make statements expressing his understanding of himself and in the world being for him what he understands it to be, but in his being what he understands himself to be" (4). This outlook "is embedded in the epic and dramatic literatures of the Western world and in the writings of the historians: this is how human beings appear in Homer, in the sagas of Scandinavia, in Shakespeare and Racine, in Livy and in Gibbon" (4). Yet "because this 'freedom' inherent in the human condition is not gratuitous and has to be paid for with responsibility, it has been viewed with misgivings and even counted a misery to be escaped, if only escape were possible….But it is impossible. The very contemplation of such an escape announces its impossibility: only mind can regret having to think….The price of the intelligent activity which constitutes being human is learning" (5).

Oakeshott understood the term "human nature" to refer to the common condition of all human beings to have to learn to be human; in this respect a human being is not only embedded in historical circumstances but also an individual, a self among other selves. For Oakeshott, a human life is "an adventure….[T]here is no substantive perfect man or human life upon which" to model one's conduct (9). Learning to be human is the life-long effort to discover what one's world means, and to accept that this requires conversation with others who, though themselves individuals, necessarily share this condition. Like Deneen, Oakeshott was committed to liberty and responsibility, while emphasizing, in a way that Deneen does not, the adventure of individual self-discovery.

All of life is a learning process, but in the midst of everything that is going on there are "places of learning" historically set aside for those who recognize themselves first and foremost as learners (15). In this they are like all others in one respect, but in their self-conscious devotion to learning they distinguish themselves. Furthermore, "learning here is not a limited undertaking in which

[9]Michael Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning," in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989; Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991), 3–34; available at http://www.studyplace.org/wiki/images/9/9e/Oakeschott-A-Place-of-Learning.pdf. All further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

what is learned is learned merely up to the point where it can be put to some extrinsic use; learning itself is the engagement and it has its own standards of achievement and excellence" (10–11). The core meaning of institutions of liberal learning is their embrace of learning for its own sake. This does not mean that in practice there are no other motives at work, for of course that will always be true of human beings; but for Oakeshott, without this core commitment the identity of the place of liberal learning will be submerged or forgotten. Such places are

> [p]laces apart where a declared learner is emancipated from the limitations of his local circumstances and from the wants he may happen to have acquired and is moved by intimations of what he has never yet dreamed. He finds himself invited to pursue satisfactions he has never yet imagined or wished for. They are then sheltered places where excellences may be heard because the din of local partialities is no more than a distant rumble. They are places where a learner is initiated into what there is to be learned. (p. 11)

What is to be learned? Oakeshott suggests the word for it is "culture," and he expands on its meaning:

> A culture is not a doctrine or a set of consistent teachings or conclusions about a human life. It is not something we can set before ourselves as a subject of liberal learning, any more than we can set self-understanding before ourselves as something to be learned; it is that which is learned in everything we may learn….[It is] a continuity of feelings, perceptions, ideas, engagements, attitudes, etc., pulling in different directions, often critical of one another and contingently related to one another so as to compose, not a doctrine, but what I shall call a conversational encounter.…[It is] not only the lyre of Apollo but also the pipes of Pan, the call of the wild; not only the poet but also the physicist; not only the majestic metropolis of Augustinian theology but also the "greenwood" of Franciscan Christianity. A culture comprises unfinished intellectual and emotional journeyings, expeditions now abandoned but known to us in the tattered maps left behind by the explorers….And [all this] reaches us, as it reached generations before ours, neither as long-ago terminated specimens of human adventure, nor as an accumulation of human achievements we are called upon to accept, but as a manifold of invitations to look, to listen and to reflect….[I]t is learning to recognize some specific invitations to encounter particular adventures in human self-understanding. (pp. 16–17)

As I see it, this is the fundamental experience that ought to be available to the young person entering college or university, an experience more and more obscured, rejected, or not even known among today's professoriate. Deneen might find Oakeshott too loose-jointed, perhaps not morally directed enough. But "moral direction" is exactly what we are threatened by in contemporary places of liberal learning. The emphasis is not on self-discovery or the adventure of learning to make sense of for ourselves an ancient, multifaceted heritage, but on conforming to a predetermined package of ideological requirements that preclude and caricature the kind of adventure Oakeshott evokes. I am skeptical that the answer is to oppose one such package using another, and suggest instead that we oppose/avoid using such packages altogether. Otherwise, we reinvent the very sort of rationalist planning we set out to eradicate. For this reason, I am also leery of mission statements and strategic plans; nowadays they mostly reflect the obsessions of the political intelligentsia. What is essential is curricular commitment to teaching Western civilization as the fundamental initiation into liberal learning (but not, of course, to the exclusion of studying other cultures).

What Deneen wants students to know they would inevitably encounter in the adventurous environment Oakeshott describes. Of course, they will make up their own minds as to where they take themselves, but they will do so with a more comprehensive and serious awareness of their options, and one hopes with awareness of the profundity of choosing a way of life, of embracing an examined life. Such a life involves moral discipline, if not a code.

Oakeshott judged that the contemporary place of learning was betraying itself in the name of "relevance" when "like Ulysses, we should have stopped our ears with wax and bound ourselves to the mast of our own identity" (19). Even worse is "the belief that 'relevance' demands that every learner should be recognized as nothing but a role-performer in a so-called social system and the consequent surrender of learning (which is the concern of individual persons) to 'socialization'….[I]t strikes at the heart of liberal learning, it portends the abolition of man" (20). Oakeshott is right about this and surely Deneen agrees. They differ perhaps in responding to this disquieting situation. Oakeshott concludes:

> How shall a university respond to the current aversion from seclusion, to the now common belief that there are other and better ways of becoming human than by learning to do so, and to the impulsive longing to be given a doctrine or socialized according to a formula rather than to be initiated into a conversation? Not, I think, by seeking excuses for what sometimes seem unavoidable surrenders, nor in any grand gesture of defiance, but in a quiet

> refusal to compromise which comes only in self-understanding. We must remember who we are: inhabitants of a place of liberal learning. (p. 34)

It is important for us now to ask whether that response is sufficient, reflecting as it does the stoic lot of the philosopher who sees that in trying to overcome politicization one risks perpetuating it. It is legitimate to wonder whether opposing programs one dislikes with alternatives that, however better their content, operate in the same programmatic way, will actually liberate us from the cave in which we now find ourselves.