

The Higher Illiteracy

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Legend has it that as Gertrude Stein lay dying, her longtime companion Alice B. Toklas, believing that the dying might have clairvoyant powers, asked, “Gertrude, what is the answer?” To which came the very sensible reply, “That depends, Alice, on what the question is.”

Many people have long claimed that some sort of core curriculum is the answer. But to what question is a core curriculum the answer? It has been offered as an answer to several, among them: How might colleges and universities restore some semblance of coherence to a fragmented and oftentimes chaotic curriculum? How might we rectify our students’ abysmal ignorance of the history of human thought and culture? How might we provide undergraduates with the broad background knowledge that specialized or advanced instruction often presupposes but does not provide? How can we prepare students to see, and to make, connections between different disciplines and areas of study? What is needed to make students “culturally literate”?

I believe that a core curriculum addresses these questions, but I suggest that a well-constructed core curriculum might also address, and perchance overcome, another, perhaps even more pernicious form of illiteracy that I call the “higher illiteracy.” I’ll begin by defining the higher illiteracy and diagnosing several of its sources and some of its consequences, followed by two cautionary tales

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drawn from my experience as a professor at the University of Minnesota, at the height (depth?) of the political correctness craze.

Illiteracy

Ordinary illiteracy is the inability to read and understand the written word. The higher illiteracy combines an ability to read with an ideologically induced inability or unwillingness to understand what one reads (if one chooses to read at all). This new form of illiteracy is “higher” in the sense that it is passed from teacher to student. It is a form of “magistrogenic” or teacher-induced ignorance (I owe this neologism to my late friend and former colleague John Dolan). To be clear, I am *not* suggesting that all teachers who inflict the higher illiteracy are ignorant—far from it—but that certain features of the modern academy tend to encourage and perpetuate the higher illiteracy.

The higher illiteracy is, in part, the product of the continuing balkanization of the American academy. The modern multiversity consists not only of established disciplines—which are both desirable and necessary—but also of newer programs whose primary reason for being is political, and not necessarily in a negative sense. Certainly programs in black (later African-American) studies, women’s studies, Hispanic, Native American, postcolonial, and subaltern studies may have been conceived with the best of intentions and at their best can offer valuable additions to the modern multiversity. And yet one might say of the emancipatory aims and aspirations of such programs what Sir Isaiah Berlin once observed of great liberating ideas: “The history of thought and culture is... a changing pattern of great liberating ideas which inevitably turn into suffocating straitjackets.”¹

So it has been, I believe, with the politically inspired specialized enclaves that have become little better than academic ghettos. Once incorporated into the structure of the multiversity, such divisions have helped hasten specialization, separation, and balkanization, thereby widening the divisions within the so-called academic community. But inasmuch as community requires and presupposes communication—the ability to speak a shared language—ours is a community in name only. We live and teach in a Babel of mutually incomprehensible tongues, idioms, and voices. The unavoidable division into different disciplines contributes to this condition, of course; but this only underscores the urgency and importance of crossing disciplinary boundaries, at least at the undergraduate

¹Isaiah Berlin, “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” (1961) in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Noel Annan (New York: Random House, 2012), 76.

level. The introduction of schools, centers, or programs devoted exclusively to the study of race, class, gender, and other matters merely makes the condition worse. This condition is not a diversity to be celebrated and welcomed, but a disaster to be lamented and, if possible, overcome. One way—perhaps the only way—of doing this is to re-introduce a core curriculum as a corrective to the partial, parochial, and sometimes partisan idioms in which modern academic discourse is too often conducted.

Before attempting to re-introduce such a curriculum, one must first criticize—or, fighting fire with fire, “deconstruct”—the defenses and arguments against the very idea of a core curriculum. In what follows I attempt to make a modest move in this critical but, I hope, ultimately constructive, direction.

It's All Now, You See

I'll begin with a tale drawn from my own experience at the University of Minnesota, where I taught political theory from 1972 to 1998. Although it involves the use and abuse of alleged gender differences, this tale is not directed against feminists, feminism, or women's studies programs (in one of which I was once proud to be an adjunct faculty member). Similar stories can no doubt be told about the various disciplines, including my own. I tell the tale not because my experience is unique, but because it is, I suspect, all too typical.

In spring 1997 I taught a course in environmental ethics and politics. Admission was restricted to juniors, seniors, and a sprinkling of graduate students. It was a brighter than average group, most of whom were hardworking and eager to learn. Early on, however, something disquieting happened. During one class, while discussing the responsibilities that earlier generations have to later ones, the discussion naturally turned to the relationship between the passage of time and the continuation or diminution of responsibility (as found, for example, in statutes of limitation in the law). One young woman claimed that our discussion was deficient insofar as gender differences were not being taken into account. I encouraged her to elaborate. Men and women, she said, have very different understandings of time. I asked her for clarification. “Well,” she said—and here I quote from memory—“Men understand time only as numbers on a clock, while women experience the passage of time more subjectively and personally, as a process. Men measure time ‘objectively’; women feel or experience it subjectively.” She then explained that this gender-based difference was only one of many differences between the “white male system” and the “female system.” How, I asked, did she come to discover this difference? She

replied that she had read it in Anne Wilson Schaeff's *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System*, a standard text in an introductory women's studies course that she had taken at another university.²

That men and women understand and experience time very differently is, I agreed, an interesting and important idea. But is it *true*? Is it true, for example, that men never experience the sensation that time flies or hangs heavy on one's hands? And what about the nurse who took my pulse during a medical checkup? She appeared to view time not "subjectively" but as "numbers on a clock." Had she thus ceased to be a woman or to be womanly?

I told the class how, while waiting outside the delivery room (this was back before the father-to-be was allowed inside that sanctum sanctorum) for the birth of my first son, time almost seemed to stand still. Was I not, I asked, experiencing time "subjectively"? "Perhaps you were," my student answered. Well then, I continued, does this mean that I am not, or was not at that moment, a man? Did I experience a momentary lapse in or loss of manliness? "No," she replied, "that merely shows that you're more sensitive than most men, in that you at least momentarily allowed your female side to show itself."

Her answer, although admirably diplomatic, did not satisfy me; I pressed on. To make a long story short, she and several other students said that there are a few exceptional men who might on occasion manage to make a partial escape from the "White Male System,"³ including its understanding of time, as articulated and defended by men, mostly philosophers or other writers who were white, male, Western, and dead.

Now we're getting somewhere, I thought. The philosophers were at fault. It's high time, I said, that we should name them, and nail them. Which philosophers, I asked, had articulated and defended this "white male" view of time? No one in the class could name any names, but all were certain that such philosophers had once existed and claimed that the only "real" or "true" time is that which is measured by a clock. After all, Anne Wilson Schaeff had said so. I promised my students that I would read her book, which I did the next day (it didn't take long). I found, to my delight and dismay, that my student had read and understood Schaeff's discussion, and had given me and her classmates an accurate account of the contents of *Women's Reality*.

²Anne Wilson Schaeff, *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System*, 3rd ed. (New York: HarperOne, 1992).

³Ibid., 8.

Our next class meeting was memorable. I began by saying that I had several questions about Schaeff's sweeping generalization about the white male system's understanding of time as "clock time." What about the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who had drawn a famous distinction between *le temps*—time as measured by clocks—and *le durée*—time as experienced by the beholder? None of my students had heard of Bergson. I told them that Bergson was indeed white, male, Western, and dead—and that he not only held but defended views that run counter to a real or imagined white male system. And there were other twentieth-century white, Western, male philosophers such as Edmund Husserl, who wrote about "the phenomenology of internal time-consciousness"⁴ and such, joining the ranks of Heraclitus, Plato, Augustine, Nietzsche, and Alfred North Whitehead, to name only a few philosophers through the ages.

Passing from philosophy to literature, one might mention William Faulkner, who in "The Bear" makes much of his young hero's relinquishing his pocket watch as a ritual preparation for viewing the bear, and who in *Intruder in the Dust* has narrator Charles Mallison say: "It's all *now*, you see. Yesterday won't be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago."⁵ Not exactly a clock-like or chronological conception of time. Or one could turn to J.T. Fraser's anthology, *The Voices of Time*, not one of whose all-male contributors subscribes to the view that time is simply and solely that which is measured by clocks.⁶ And of course Salvador Dali's depiction of flaccid dials and melting clockfaces was almost too obvious to merit mentioning.

I concluded by saying that these, along with many other counterexamples, pointed to the possibility that what Anne Wilson Schaeff wrote about a system created by dead white men and maintained by living ones is demonstrably dead wrong. Unfortunately, my students did not know—because they had no way of knowing—that many of Schaeff's assertions are simply false and *Women's Reality* is a veritable mine of misinformation.

My students were astonished to hear this. Some had, as they told me, not bothered to read dead white male authors because they "already knew" what they had to say; and what they had to say was not merely mistaken but politically pernicious—or so they had been told by their teachers. Some of my brightest

⁴Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (1917), ed. R. Boehm (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), trans. J.B. Brough as *On the Consciousness of Internal Time* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991).

⁵William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust* (New York: Modern Library, 1948), 194.

⁶J.T. Fraser, ed., *The Voices of Time: A Cooperative Survey of Man's Views of Time as Expressed by the Sciences and by the Humanities* (New York: George Braziller, 1966).

students had, in short, accepted as authentic a picture that proves, on closer examination, to be the crudest kind of caricature.

Laying a Foundation

What does this one sad story have to do with a core curriculum? Just this: My students suffered from the higher illiteracy not because they failed in this instance to detect one particular falsehood in one particular book but because they could not do so, there or elsewhere. And they could not because they did not have the background knowledge and elementary reasoning skills that would allow them to assess the adequacy, truth, or falsity of what they read. Lacking this background, they fell back on the presumed authority, and perhaps what they took to be the political correctness, of a particular author.

To provide such a background and skills is a central task of any education deserving of the name. One way to begin building a background—or, to use a metaphor despised by self-styled “antifoundationalists,” to lay a foundation—is to construct a coherent core curriculum.

The most common objection is that a core will inevitably “privilege” the “hegemonic” perspective of the white male system while “marginalizing” the perspectives of women and people of color. The ostensible purpose of a core curriculum is to provide students with broad background knowledge; but its real, albeit hidden purpose is to perpetuate white male hegemony. The curriculum, like everything else, is political; it is a conduit through which power is exercised and legitimated.

How does one counter such objections to the very idea of a core curriculum? There are any number of ways of doing so. One of the best strategies is simply to take the objections seriously and answer them head-on. That is what I and several colleagues at the University of Minnesota tried to do some years ago in response to an attempt to revamp the humanities curriculum along postmodernist lines. What follows is a slightly revised version of an op-ed I wrote for the student newspaper, in reply to a piece by “Professor X” defending the proposed changes. I call him “Professor X” not only to preserve his anonymity but also because his views represent those of many other academics and—not least—because he is a friend and colleague who may yet see the error of his ways. My reply is not meant to be a model for others to follow, but is offered as illustrative of individual attempts to address a frequent objection to re-instituting a core curriculum.

LWGs vs. DWGs

In “My Enemies are Intolerance, Ignorance, and Privilege,” Professor X concocts an enemies list with which I agree (who wouldn’t?) and to which I’d add “sanctimoniousness” and “self-righteousness.” Too many LWGs (Live White Guys) are going around saying nasty things about DWGs (Dead White Guys). Yes, Plato—perhaps the preeminent DWG—lived and wrote in a time and place that denigrated women and exploited slaves. We should not forget, as Professor X reminds us, that “In the age of Plato, an Athenian citizen regularly gave thanks for having been born ‘a man, not a woman, free not a slave, and Greek not a barbarian.’”

All the more remarkable, then, that in his *Republic* Plato made the shocking suggestion that women were fit for all occupations and that some should receive a rigorous education in philosophy and join the elite ruling Guardians, eligible even to become a philosopher-ruler. In the *Symposium* several participants make misogynist remarks. Socrates refuses to follow suit, saying that his first and greatest teacher, Diotima, was a woman. And in another of Plato’s dialogues, the *Meno*, Socrates illustrates his claim that knowledge is a kind of recollection or remembrance by questioning not his fellow philosopher Meno but a slave boy. These and other suggestions were surely shocking, not to say subversive of the conventional wisdom of Plato’s day. Or consider Socrates’s contemporary Sophocles (another DWG). His play *Antigone* features not a hero but a heroine—Antigone—who in word and deed defies the tyrant Creon.

Many of the DWGs whose works some of us still admire and attempt to teach were on pretty rough terms with their contemporaries. To cite merely the most obvious example, Socrates’s fellow Athenians condemned him to death for encouraging young men to question the conventional beliefs of their elders. The list of DWGs who met similarly unhappy ends is long: Jesus was crucified, Cicero assassinated, Machiavelli tortured, Thomas More beheaded, and Locke, Rousseau, and Marx hounded out of their own countries. None seems to fit the picture of the privileged white male basking comfortably in and reinforcing the prejudices of his time and culture.

Apparently undaunted by such considerations, Professor X continues: “When in reading Plato, can we...afford to forget that ‘Golden Age’ Athens was a slave economy, that women were utterly disempowered, [etc.]—none of which fits easily with a vision of Athens as the unalloyed fountainhead of world democracy?” Fair enough. But whoever counseled otherwise? Certainly Hegel—to mention yet another DWG—claimed that the partiality and one-sidedness of the Athenian democracy pointed in the direction of democracy and

the universal franchise without even coming close to achieving it. But he also noted that first attempts, though rarely successful, are important, since once introduced into the ongoing conversation they can change its direction by pointing toward possibilities as yet unimagined and therefore unattempted.

Rather surprising stuff from DWGs whose “texts” allegedly not only mirror and legitimize the prejudices of their day, but also—if I understand Professor X correctly—to this day retain their power to poison young minds. If the latter is true, one of two conclusions seems to follow: either we should not require our students to read the works of DWGs *or* we should somehow prepare them to dislike and distrust what they read. Both conclusions are compatible with the prejudices of contemporary culture, which holds, in Henry Ford’s words, that “history is bunk” and that only the present matters anyway. I daresay many of our students would agree.

But far from settling the matter, this raises a more troubling question about our vocation. Should we, as teachers, pander to our students’ prejudices and those of our own time and place? Or should we try to follow Socrates’s example and help them to examine themselves and their society in a more critical light? If the latter, should we not avail ourselves of every resource—including, but not limited to, the works of DWGs?

The unexamined life, as Socrates liked to say, is not worth living. It was good advice then, and it is good advice now. At least some of what needs examining are current conventional pieties and prejudices that constitute what I am calling the higher illiteracy. Perhaps all of us—even professors—might occasionally walk in the dead white guys’ sandals, however uncomfortable that experience may be.

Debatability

I am sorry to say that the two aforementioned autobiographical asides are merely minor skirmishes in the civil war still raging within the American academy. Like it or not, the hope of constructing a core curriculum is ensnared in, and part of, the ongoing and increasingly uncivil “canon wars,” which seem unlikely to end soon, if ever. Such conflicts between “the classics and the moderns” can be constructive, in that they lead us to reassess the strengths and shortcomings of our intellectual inheritance. But I am not at all certain that the present conflict is merely another replay of that venerable controversy. The “debate,” such as it is, often seems less intellectual or even political, than theological. It has all the trappings of a jihad, a holy war fought for the souls

of the young, pitting postmodernist mullahs like Stanley Fish, on the one side, against Allan Bloom and other defenders of the Sacred Texts, on the other.

If this is the choice, then I don't want to choose. Nor do I want a core curriculum that reflects one view or the other. Speaking for myself and as a teacher, I would prefer a core curriculum that steers a middle course between the Scylla of the one extreme, and the Charybdis of the other—and that would, among many other things, enable students to understand the meaning and point of this particular Homeric allusion.