LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE QUESTION OF TRUTH

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We're here to talk about a simple question: What is the point of liberal education? What does it aim at? What is the good we try to move toward through the liberal arts?

Let me venture a simple answer: liberal education aims at truth. For liberal learning, truth is the highest good. The point of liberal education is to learn to move--through dialogue with others and through our own thinking--towards the light of truth.

But this answer raises other questions: What are we looking for when we look for truth? What kinds of truth are proper to the liberal arts? In what sense can the liberal arts make claims to truth? What is truth?

If we want to think seriously about these questions, I think, we have to come to terms with the work of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger worked out a distinctive understanding of truth, and also a history of concepts of truth in the West. This history of truth can help to illuminate the history of liberal education, and to clarify in what sense liberal education aims at truth.

Let me try to sketch this story, starting from the beginning. What were the origins of liberal education? How was the end of liberal education originally understood? And what notion of truth was implicit in this original understanding?

The Traditional Ends of Liberal Education

We know there has actually never been any consensus on the final end of liberal education. Ideas about liberal education have been divided between two traditions.

In one tradition, liberal education aims to prepare students for a life of *political* freedom, by training them in the arts they needed to be active and responsible citizens. This is explicit in Cicero, who defined the liberal arts as "the arts that are proper to a free citizen."[1] The emphasis in this tradition was on the arts of grammar and rhetoric. And the ultimate aim liberal education was φρόνησις--judgment, prudence, the ability to see singularities for what they are, to understand what kind of action is called for by each singular situation.

In another tradition, liberal education prepares students for a life of *intellectual* freedom by training them in the arts they needed to liberate themselves from thoughtless adherence to inherited opinions. The emphasis in this tradition was on the arts of logic and dialectic, as well as the forms of mathematics that were paradigms of clear thought. The ultimate aim of liberal education was σοφία--wisdom, an understanding of what is essential to a good life. This is explicit in Seneca, who wrote: "there is only one really liberal study,--that which gives a man his liberty. It is the study of wisdom."[2]

Despite their differences, both traditions shared a common assumption: scientific knowledge was only one form of understanding among others. In addition to science, or επιστήμη, they distinguished opinion, know-how, judgement, and wisdom (δόξα, τέχνη, φρόνησις and σοφία). Each form of understanding was a distinct path to truth.

Heidegger knew that truth has been conceived in different ways. In the allegory of the cave, Plato thought of truth primarily as a matter or likeness (ὁμοίωσις) or correctness (ὀρθότης). For Aristotle the locus of truth was not between beings and their ideas but between what we think and what is: "The false and the true are not in things (themselves)...but in the intellect."[3] For Aquinas the primary locus of truth was the intellect of God: "Truth is properly encountered in the human or in the divine intellect."[4] With Descartes truth became a matter of representation and certainty--the locus of truth is the representation of an object in the mind of a subject: "I am certain that I can have no knowledge of what is outside me except by means of the ideas I have within me."[5] While Kant distinguished the objects of experience from things in themselves, he retained the traditional concept of truth as a kind of correspondence: "What is truth? The nominal definition of truth, that it is the agreement of knowledge with its object, is assumed as granted."[6] But Heidegger argued all these concepts assume truth is a matter of correspondence between thought and reality. In his view, this view of truth as correspondence has dominated most of the philosophical tradition.

The Challenge of Modern Science

Heidegger thought this traditional concept of truth shifted with the emergence of modern science. Modern science was founded on different understanding of truth, and this understanding of truth underlies the institutions of the modern research university.

Modern philosophers accepted the traditional concept of truth as a matter of correspondence between thought and reality. But they altered this concept of truth in two decisive ways: they assumed that the test of truth is certainty, i.e. that no belief can

be considered true unless it is known for certain; and they assumed that certainty could be established only on the basis of evidence so clear and distinct that it is indubitable to any rational mind. These two new assumptions were most clearly articulated by Descartes in the first rule of scientific method laid down in his *Discourse on Method*:

> The first [rule] was never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid hasty judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it into doubt.[7]

This intrication of truth and certainty is still commonly taken for granted today, even by the most skeptical thinkers; skeptics tend to deny that truth is attainable precisely because they assume knowledge must be certain in order to be true. Modern scientists are cautious about claiming to have final and definitive truth precisely because they know most scientific findings are never certain and always provisional.

The power of this concept of truth is undeniable. The world in which we live has been shaped by the scientific methods it grounds and guides.

Here we have to distinguish between *science* and *scientism*. Science is a search for universally valid knowledge. Scientism is the belief that modern science is the only genuine form of knowledge. A scientist is a practitioner of science, not a believer in scientism. To be critical of scientism is not in any way to denigrate science itself.

The challenge to the traditional liberal arts came not from modern science, understood as a universally valid yet distinct and limited form of knowledge. The challenge came instead from *scientism*, the uncritical belief that modern science is the only genuine form of understanding, and that scientific truth is the only genuine form of truth. This belief was articulated with exemplary clarity in 1880 by Thomas Huxley, who argued that "liberal education" should be re-founded on "an unhesitating faith that the free employment of reason, in accordance with the scientific method, is the *sole* method of reaching truth."[8] This scientism challenged the notion of truth underlying the traditions of liberal education. The intrication of truth and certainty reversed the traditional hierarchy of forms of understanding. The highest form of understanding was no longer either judgment or wisdom but scientific knowledge; the highest kind of truth was not a clear understanding of how to act in our particular situation, or how to live well in general, but quantitative knowledge based on factual evidence.[9]

One effect of this reversal was that the search for wisdom was delegitimated as unscientific. Many thinkers dismissed as sophistry or illusion any claim to nonscientific truth, and consigned whole disciplines of thought to oblivion. This de-legitimation was expressed with exemplary clarity by the philosopher David Hume:

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume, of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity and number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matters of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.[10]

Scientism had an especially powerful effect on the humanities. Once scientific truth was held to be the only real form of truth, the humanities could no longer be approached as sources of truth. Humanists generally responded to this challenge in one of two ways.

On the one hand, there have been attempts to cast the humanities into the mold of the modern sciences. Philosophers have tried to remake their discipline into "a rigorous science." Historians have tried to model their discipline on the natural sciences, and to find universal laws governing the phenomena of history. Classicists have come to think of their discipline not as part of a living tradition but as the study of dead languages. Humanistic study was re-conceived as quasi-scientific research.[11]

On the other hand, there have been attempts to re-conceive the humanities as disciplines aimed at something other than truth. Some humanists have claimed the goal of humanistic education is primarily *aesthetic*--the formation of an aesthetic sensibility. Others have claimed the point of humanistic education is primarily *ethical*--the cultivation of the virtues proper to a given ethos. Others have claimed the aim of the humanities is ultimately *political*--to promote justice by raising consciousness and demystifying the ideologies that support injustice.

While both responses have produced valuable work in the humanities, they have distorted the traditional aims of liberal education insofar as they no longer approach the humanities as a way to wisdom or a search for truths higher than scientific truth.

Liberal Education and Truth

We have to retrieve and refine the traditional ends of liberal education. And to do so we have to offer a clear critique of prevailing models of higher education today. We have to

explain how liberal education has been distorted by the assumptions underlying the modern research university. We have to be able to explain both the legitimacy and the limits of the view of education embodied by the research university. We have to respond to the challenge of the research university by drawing on the resources of the liberal intellectual tradition in order to retrieve, refine, and rethink the assumptions that sustained the traditional liberal arts college.

The first task is to rethink traditional concepts of *truth*. We need a critique of scientism that shows both the legitimacy and the limits of scientific truth. And we need to explain in what sense one can speak of non-scientific truths--truths of art, history, interpretation, and scripture.

To do this we have to retrieve an understanding of truth that runs through the Western traditions without ever being fully grasped in conceptual thought--the understanding of truth as the kind of illumination or disclosure that Heidegger called "*unconcealment.*" We already have a rough understanding of truth in this sense when we speak of a "moment of truth"--an instant when something that has been obscure suddenly comes to light and becomes clearly apparent. In this idiom, "the moment of truth," truth is implicitly understood not as a correspondence between thought and reality, but as the illumination or disclosure that underlies truth in the traditional sense--that first makes possible any correspondence or non-correspondence between thought and reality.

This sense of truth as unconcealment is implicit but unnoticed in many classic works. It is already legible in Plato's allegory of the cave, where the movement of the prisoners is not simply from semblance to reality, or from a less correct to a more correct vision, but from a place from which the sun is hidden to a place where the sunlit landscape is disclosed and illuminated. This sense of truth as unconcealment is also implicit but not grasped conceptually in a certain Christian understanding of the revelatory power of language; it is legible in the notion that the truth of the Gospel parables lies in their power to unearth and disclose what--like a treasure hidden in a field--has been hidden since the foundations of the world.[12]

The aim of Heidegger's thought was not to return us to a Greek concept of truth, but to clarify an understanding of truth we already have without knowing it, to grasp explicitly what we already understand in a thoughtless and inarticulate way.

The implications of Heidegger's concept of truth cannot be summarized in a few pages. Let me just emphasize two basic points:

First, the concept of unconcealment helps to clarify the truth of judgment (φρόνησις). A judgment may be perfectly correct, in the sense it accurately corresponds to certain facts of a matter, and yet may be profoundly untrue, in the sense that it focuses on what is inessential and utterly fails to illuminate the heart of the matter. A judgment is true not when it adequately represents what is superficial and inessential, but when it reveals and brings to light the essential. So the truth of judgment is not ultimately a matter of correspondence but of revelation, illumination, unconcealment. Heidegger made this point in a lecture on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "φρόνησις...eminently illustrates the meaning of ἀ-λθεύειν, i.e. the uncovering of something concealed."[13]

Second, the concept of unconcealment also helps to clarify the truth of wisdom (σοφία). Even at the crudest level of everyday understanding, we have a sense that wisdom cannot be contained in propositions, and that the truth of wisdom cannot be understood as a correspondence of thought with reality. Instead, we sense that to be wise means to have a clear vision of what is essential to a good life. The truth of this vision is not a matter of correctness, but of its power to disclose and illuminate what really matters. So Heidegger also understood the truth of wisdom as unconcealment: "σοφία is the other highest possibility of ἀληθεύειν."[14]

The concept of truth as unconcealment helps to distinguish three dimensions of thought, and three movements we have to make in order to move toward truth.

In one dimension we move from *ignorance* to *knowledge*. Knowledge can be directly transmitted from professor to student. So this movement occurs as a progressive accumulation of facts and skills conveyed to the student by textbooks and lectures. The truth of this kind of knowledge is a matter of correspondence and certainty--a correspondence between thought and reality, which is certain only if it is grounded on absolutely clear and distinct evidence.

In a second dimension we move from *average* towards *genuine* understanding--from an understanding that is more or less shallow, confused, vague, simplistic, and crude, towards an understanding that is deep, clear, precise, complex, and refined. This kind of understanding is essential to both judgement and wisdom, φρόνησις and σοφία. The truth of this understanding is a matter of unconcealment--the disclosure and illumination of what things are. This kind of truth cannot be directly transmitted from professor to student. It is a kind of truth students have to reach through their own thought and experience. This is why students have to make a third movement:

In a third dimension we move from an *inauthentic* towards *authentic* understanding--from an understanding that is not really our *own* (one that we have simply because we

share it in common with others) towards an understanding that is truly our *own* in the sense that it is based on our *own* experience, reading, discussion, and thought.

So to look for truth we have to make three movements: We have to move from *ignorance* to *knowledge*. We have to move from an *average* to a *genuine* understanding of things. But in order to make this movement we also have to move from an *inauthentic* to a more *authentic* understanding, that is, we have to take on ourselves the responsibility to read closely, to listen carefully, to try to find the grains of truth in different points of view, and then, in light of our own experience and on the basis of our own thoughts, to work out our ***own*** understanding of what is true. This is why--in a liberal education--students are asked not to learn the thoughts of others, but to give their ***own*** thoughts.

How do we make these three movements of thought? What are the disciplines that enable us to move toward knowledge, toward genuine understanding, and towards authenticity? What art the *arts* proper to this search for truth?

They are the *arts* proper to *liberal* education: not just the seven classic liberal arts; but also the arts practiced here at Saint John's: reading, listening, questioning, discussing, writing, thinking, and of meditation.

The aim of these arts is truth--not just the truth of knowledge but the truth of judgement and wisdom. The point of a liberal arts education is to enable students to move--in dialogue with the tradition and with other people--toward the light of truth.

Conclusion

Let me sum up. Liberal education was originally guided by traditional assumptions about the nature of truth. These assumptions supported the distinctive institutions of the liberal arts college: its curricula; pedagogies; disciplinary divisions; the roles of faculty and students; and the discourse in which education was understood. These institutions were challenged with the emergence of modern science, whose founders radically reconceived the nature of truth. These new concepts of truth laid the foundations of the modern scientific research university and its distinctive institutions: the library, the laboratory, the lecture hall, autonomous departments, and the elective system. But the research university did not simply *replace* the liberal arts college. Instead, liberal arts colleges were largely uprooted from their underlying assumptions, and *incorporated* into the modern research university. In the process, the liberal arts were re-cast in the mold of the modern sciences, and were reinterpreted in light of the assumptions about truth underlying the research university. These new concepts of truth have distorted and concealed the traditional meaning of liberal education.

Liberal arts colleges have to clarify in what sense liberal education aims at truth. And to do so we have to offer a clear critique of prevailing models of higher education today. We have to explain how liberal education has been distorted by the assumptions underlying the modern research university. We have to be able to explain both the legitimacy and the limits of the view of education embodied by the research university. We have to respond to the challenge of the research university by drawing on the resources of the liberal intellectual tradition in order to retrieve, refine, and rethink the ends of liberal education.

Notes

[1] Cicero, *De Oratore,* 1.72. Quoted in Bruce Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: The College Entrance Examination Board, 1995) 36.

[2] Seneca, Letter LXXXVIII. On Liberal and Vocational Studies" in *Letter from a Stoic,* tr. Robin Campbell (New York: Penguin Books, 1969) 159.

3 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredenick (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 307 (1027b25).

4 Aquinas, quoted in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 178.

5 René Descartes, "From the Letter to Gibieuf, 19 January 1642," in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters,* trans. and ed. by Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 123.

6 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965) 97.

[7] René Descartes, *The Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy,* tr. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1998) 11.

[8] Thomas Huxley, "Science and Culture," quoted in Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995) 171 (italics added).

[9] This reversal is most clearly expressed by the words carved in stone on the façade of the Social Science Research Building at the University of Chicago: "If you cannot measure, your knowledge is meagre and unsatisfactory." This inscription is a paraphrase of Lord Kelvin's dictum: "When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meagre and unsatisfactory kind; it may be the beginning of knowledge, but you have scarcely in your thoughts advanced to the state of *Science,* whatever the matter may be." Kelvin's words are quoted at zapatopi.net/kelvin/quotes/. The inscription is discussed by Thomas Kuhn in *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 178.

[10] David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) 165.

[11] Classics for example became largely a branch of philology. One still studied Greek and Roman texts, not as sources of a living tradition but as one set of objects among others. This approach obliterated the original rationale for the study of classics. Hence the proliferation of spurious rationales, such as the theory of "mental discipline."

There were also attempts to remake history on the model of the new sciences. There was, for example, a search for laws of history analogous to the laws of nature. This analogy was explicit in Marxism; Engels wrote that "Just as Darwin discovered the law of development of organic nature, so Marx discovered the law of development of human history." (Friedrich Engels, quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994, p. 388)

There were also attempts to make philosophy a science in the modern sense, and to reject all previous philosophy as "metaphysical," that is, unscientific nonsense.

[12] Matthew 13:34-5 and 13:44. "Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden [κεκρυμμένα] since the foundation of the world." "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden [κεκρυμμένω] in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." (New Revised Standard Version.)

[13] Martin Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 36.

[14] Heidegger, *Plato's Sophist*, 42.