"Teaching Philosophy in College: The Effectual Truth"
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16 October 2014
Conference: What Is Liberal Education For?
A Conference at St. John's College on the 50th Anniversary of the Santa Fe Campus
Panel: Underpinnings of an Education in the Classics

Abstract: Philosophical education at the collegiate level has become increasingly difficult in recent years. Obstacles arise due to the preparedness of the students, the composition of the faculty, and the character of American academic institutions. A decisive shift has made it reasonable to regard institutions of higher learning as primarily devoted to preparing students for gainful employment rather than to cultivating their minds. In schools where philosophy courses are still required and teachers try to communicate to their students and their colleagues the centrality of philosophy within education, there is a danger that we overlook the permanent obstacles to philosophy within human nature. In what sense is philosophy both a peak achievement of human intelligence and something to be required for and beneficial to every student? Classical philosophy (paradigmatically Plato) identifies a certain disharmony between philosophy and the city; Descartes (Enlightenment philosophy generally) suggests that philosophy can be universally beneficial and harmonious with the concerns of ordinary life. Can philosophy in the classical tradition be presented in an Enlightenment mode?

Part One: Our Context

Teaching philosophy in college today is impossible. This thesis can be proved through at least eight middle terms.[1] I take some solace from the fact it has always been impossible, and yet it has happened. So teaching philosophy is almost always impossible. Insofar as this is a practical problem, our goal is not the best education simply, but the best we can reasonably aim at in our circumstances.

By "our circumstances" I mean, first, the smallish, Catholic liberal arts college, within which there yet remains something of the Catholic emphasis on philosophy, tenuously allied now with other concerns like providing job credentials and de-occidentalizing the curriculum as far as possible, except in science. I

[1] One can find insuperable obstacles in our regime, our schools, and our students themselves. Here is one list of eight obstacles.

1. Self-esteem and the death of eros.
2. Functional illiteracy of the students.
3. Relativism, post-modernism, race-class-genderism.
4. Opposition from colleagues, who are not liberally educated.
5. Commercialization and professionalization of colleges.
6. Scientism.
7. Shrunken curriculum.
8. American anti-philosophical character.

speak not of unusual places like St. John's, but of schools like my own Assumption College, schools more or less devoted to the liberal arts, more or less Catholic, and more or less tending from the more to the less. I am eager to learn how the matters about which I speak appear to this audience.

Teaching philosophy in these circumstances has a horizontal and a vertical trajectory. We require philosophy of all students as essential to their education, and yet we try to preserve openness to the highest peak made possible by the pursuit of philosophy. Needless to say, such a peak is reserved for the rarest of students. And nevertheless, if we lose sight of that vertical trajectory, we popularize philosophy so that it becomes something else. Without wisdom in the highest sense as its goal, philosophical education easily becomes subordinated to goals defined by citizenship or some similarly parochial bias the institution finds it reasonable to pursue.

When I say teaching philosophy is impossible, I adapt a thesis defended by John Haldane, who distinguishes an instrumentalized education from one where "an essential aspect of the value of education is intrinsic to it." He associates the former with utilitarian progressives like Bentham and Spencer, and to them he opposes first Matthew Arnold, alongside whom he lines up John Stuart Mill, John Henry Newman, Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, all of whom agree that the point of an education is the cultivation of the mind as distinct from training for what we now call professional work.[2] Arnold prizes intellectual perfection as more important for modern democracy than are economic successes or the empowerment of voters.

According to Haldane, the goal of education, as understood by Plato, Newman, and the rest, was this noble idea of perfection, but it

[2] "[T]he idea which culture sets before us of perfection . . . is an idea which the new democracy needs far more than the idea of the blessedness of the franchise, or the wonderfulness of their own industrial performances," (Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (1869; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 49). Arnold's "perfection" is distinguished not only from Philistinism (which he equates with coarseness of soul and especially the pursuit of material advancement) from the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. His "perfection" includes a kind of moral and religious cultivation.

> can only be effectively pursued through the kind of intensive education and formation that involves a relatively small number of students in each class tutored by a widely read and committed teacher. . . . This combination is impossible in a mass higher education system; and, the possibility of continuing to fund such a system even with lower educational ambitions is proving too much for the states and populations of Western Europe and for parts of North America.[3]

To be precise here, Haldane says the combination of means necessary to pursue this goal effectively—or perhaps efficiently—is impossible.

Why? The obstacles are legion; dozens of recent books and articles analyze and lament the decay of higher education. I limit myself to two points: Haldane's observation about the condition of our educational institutions and a more complicated set of observations about our colleagues, which I borrow from another essay by Haldane,[4] in which he identifies philosophy as the source of much trouble.

Haldane attaches the impossibility of effectively teaching philosophy mainly to the fact that institutions are not and no longer can be devoted to the cultivation of the mind. Instead, they have come to be dominated by the function of training students for employment and by the pursuit of prestige through research. To be clear, he distinguishes *research*, understood as the acquisition of *new* knowledge in a quasi-Weberian sense, from *scholarship*, where teachers deeply appropriate the universal and permanent significance of the tradition they transmit. Because even colleges tend to be dominated by the goals of training for employment and of pursuing research, "there is no going back in general to the conception of Arnold, Newman, and Mill."[5] (740). Haldane seems to regard this as an immovable sociological fact, and I see no reason to doubt him.

With respect to our colleagues, the situation is more complicated. Let us stipulate that they are exceptionally competent in their respective fields. Nevertheless, many of them not only do not have the kind of education they are responsible to help transmit, they actively aim at the destruction of what

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[3] John Haldane, "The Future of the University: Philosophy, Education, and the Catholic Tradition," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 87:4 (2013), 736.
[4] John Haldane, "Educational Studies and the Map of Philosophy," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60:1 (March 2012): 3–15.
[5] Haldane, "Future," 740.

would need to be preserved. According to John Agresto,[6] a liberal arts education does two things well: preserve the great thoughts and question the contemporary culture. These two activities are now under assault *within* the academy. Haldane shows how that attack is itself the product of educators' uncritical allegiance to recent philosophical thinking. On Haldane's view, during the past one hundred years or so, the "map of philosophy" has been dominated by two streams of thought: continental postmodernism on the one hand and analytic naturalism on the other. Teachers have absorbed vulgarized forms of these traditions as if they held the saving truth or, at least, as providing the certainty prerequisite to open contempt for the philosophical discipline of asking whether one's guiding opinions are actually true. Some teachers are the victims of a little philosophy, which they do not recognize as philosophy and on the basis of which they deliver denunciations of philosophy, thereby exhibiting open and disdainful pride balanced by unwitting folly.

If I sound harsh here, I don't exempt myself from the kind of mistake at issue: blindness to the gaps in one's own education and in one's grasp of the nature of education, that is to say, not knowing that one does not know and not knowing what one needs to know are *the permanent obstacles* to philosophy. Haldane describes one form of this in contemporary academics, but this kind of problem afflicts almost all of us almost all of the time. We all feel wise sometimes, and we are normally most tiresome to others in those moments.

According to Haldane, the humanities side of the academy tends to be inhabited by postmodernists, who descend from one response to what they recognized as the failure of Kantianism. That response was to question the presuppositions of the tradition, which, they argued, failed to see that our finitude and contingency enervate us; what we most need is not to contemplate the truth, but to

[6] See his "Are the Liberal Arts a Universal Good, or Are They Simply Something Western? Bringing the Liberal Arts to Iraq." This lecture was delivered at a Wilson Center Symposium entitled "The Liberal Arts and the Human Condition: Collegiate Education and the Challenge of Modernity" on 19 November 2013, at Hampden-Sydney in Virginia.

understand our "experience and the possibilities for action."[7] According to the descendants of this view, education empowers us to expose false consciousness, to delegitimize the artificial categories of race, class, and gender, and to open the way to politicized re-appropriation of the tradition. Thus, education becomes a form of socialization or training for practical involvement in a culturally diverse world.[8]

The scientific side of the academy tends to be inhabited by people influenced by analytic philosophy. This tradition, Haldane says, with its emphasis on logic, language, and mathematics, excelled first at debunking intellectual pretensions, exposing fallacies, and eliminating confusions and empty verbiage. It has more recently allied itself with the reductive naturalism of scientistic neuro-thinking. Philosophy is tolerated in the limited role of sweeping up after the sciences, but these people do not see the extent to which they are in the grip of philosophical commitments, broadly of Cartesian ancestry, which they do not understand.[9]

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[7] Haldane, "Educational Studies," 11.

[8] Michael Oakeshott provides a somewhat different analysis, according to which European rulers first promoted "apprenticeship to adult life" for the poor as an *alternative* to the education that was unavailable to them. The goal was to make these people more productive and more useful to the nation. Gradually and deliberately, this goal, commonly identified as *socialization*, was *substituted* for the goal of education understood as initiation into the inheritance of human understanding. See Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, repr. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), esp. 77-104. Oakeshott identifies political causes, and Haldane identifies philosophical causes. It seems to me possible that these amount to two sides of one coin. Incidentally, this *socialization* may be what Nietzsche complained against: "Men are to be trained for the purposes of the age to lend a hand as soon as possible: they are to labour in the factory of common utility before they are ripe, or rather to prevent their ever becoming ripe—because that would be a luxury which would draw a lot of strength from 'the labour market'" (*On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 41.

[9] The inability of scientistic thinking to account for the activity of the scientists themselves should be but is not plain to those who celebrate scientism. Jerry Coyne exemplifies this problem by mocking the incompetence of philosophers to address the matter of free will in comparison to the scientists who have finally or almost finally settled the issue. In doing so, he denies that he exists as a speaker, and he invites us to contemplate that consciousness is an illusion. "There's not much downside to abandoning the notion of free will. It's impossible, anyway, to act as though we don't have it: you'll pretend to choose your New Year's resolutions, and the laws of physics will determine whether you keep them. And there are two upsides. The first is realizing the great wonder and mystery of our evolved brains, and contemplating the notion that things like consciousness, free choice, and even the idea of "me" are but convincing illusions fashioned by natural selection. Further, by losing free will we gain empathy, for we realize that in the end all of us, whether Bernie Madoffs or Nelson Mandelas, are victims of circumstance

In both cases the problem arises from philosophical thinking received in the mode of unquestionable opinion. Our situation involves trying to teach amidst teachers who propagate dogmas that close off the opportunity to think. The irony here is that the dissemination of philosophy in a popularized mode has contributed mightily to the difficulty of teaching philosophy in college. My point is that opinion-induced blindness is *the* permanent human obstacle to philosophy. Even if all of the other obstacles to education were removed, this one would remain, and it does remain in all of us in the illusion that we know what we do not know.

Part Two: So What Do We Do?

Let me return to the distinction between the horizontal and the vertical trajectories of our efforts. On the horizontal plane, we are committed to holding that philosophy is, in some sense, essential for everybody and central to a liberal education. Among other benefits, philosophy helps students appreciate and learn to achieve clarity of conceptual thinking, precision in drawing distinctions, and rigor in argumentation. Philosophy helps students overcome the tendency of their education to fragment into separate disciplines and competing methodologies. Philosophy draws attention to fundamental questions not addressed by the several academic disciplines, and it forces the student to be mindful of himself as the being for whom education is desirable. Whereas the other disciplines train the student how to read actuarial tables or how to examine microorganisms, philosophy draws attention to the more necessary concern with the being on this end of microscope and this side of the green eye shades.

— of the genes we're bequeathed and the environments we encounter. With that under our belts, we can go about building a kinder world." Jerry A. Coyne, "Why You Don't Really Have Free Will," *USA Today* 1 January 2012, accessed 8 April 2014, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2012-01-01/free-will-science-religion/52317624/1. Coyne condescends to us at the same moment that he disqualifies himself as a speaker. As Aristotle says of the person who so undercuts himself, he is no better than a plant; one does not argue with a plant. See *Metaphysics* IV.4.1006a13–15. Incidentally, recent biological studies suggest that comparing Jerry Coyne to a plant may be unfair to plants. See Michael Pollan, "The Intelligent Plant," *The New Yorker* 89:42 (23 and 30 December 2013): 92–105. Pollan describes especially the work of Stefano Mancuso, but there are other scientists investigating similar lines of research. See Oliver Sacks, "The Mental Life of Plants and Worms, Among Others" *The New York Review of Books* LXI:7 (24 April 2014): 4–8.

This approach protects some intrinsic value to education, but it still tends to instrumentalize it and to subordinate philosophy to intellectual skills needed in all walks of life and for making people capable of governing themselves and living well in a republic.[10] Success in those goals is not yet the perfection of the human soul in wisdom, which is not by any plausible stretch the fruit of two or three required courses in a gen ed curriculum.

So how do we understand undergraduate philosophy courses? Do we abandon wisdom or the pursuit of wisdom as a *telos* while we cater to the capacities of most students, or do we go through the motions with the majority while we sift through them for the rare person who has the gift and the appetite for a philosophical life? Can we try to do justice to both concerns simultaneously? Are we willing to say out loud that we have one very modest goal with most students and another more serious goal with the very few? What do we hope to accomplish with most students? Perhaps we aim to foster in them an opinion that philosophy is good and valuable. We want them to recognize that fundamental opinions or commitments structure our personal and political lives and that philosophical thinking shapes our science, our politics, and every aspect of our thinking lives. We may tell them that philosophy can help them live better.

Harmony between the ordinary concerns of human life and philosophy is presupposed in the notion that all human beings should be educated and education should include philosophy. But philosophy has not always been so conceived. Plato's *Apology of Socrates* in particular seems to invite or even require us to recognize that the tension between philosophy and the city is not accidental. Philosophy teaches people to question what the family and the city tell them is good and true. If we genuinely awaken the power to question, there is little telling where it will lead. Averroes and Aquinas

[10] Jacob Klein identifies the "most serious" obstacle to liberal education as arising from the relation to the political community. On the one hand, preservation of political form requires attention to education, and yet education "conceived as a means to an end, a political end" cannot be the same as an education ordered to "genuine searching and questioning." See Jacob Klein, "The Idea of Liberal Education," in *Jacob Klein: Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis, MD: St. John's College Press, 1985), 168–70.

both studied Aristotle. Perhaps the emancipation of young people necessitates that they question whether their parents have been adequate guides to what is good and true, and thus the threat of destabilizing society may be unavoidable.[11] However that may be, there is a big difference in how we understand our relation to these students: are we seeking to inculcate an opinion about the nature of education and the place of philosophy in it, or are we seeking to awaken the power to question?

If we aim at cultivating inquiry in the deepest sense, we have limited ourselves as a matter of fact to very few students. But when we do this, we do what philosophy alone can do. I presume we are up to the task, but I may be too optimistic. Nietzsche suggests that capable teachers are like major league pitchers: there are not enough to go around.[12] A student with great natural gifts has probably more opportunity now than ever before to find a seat in college, but will he or she find there a guide suited and able to open the door to a genuinely philosophical life?

If we assume that we are up to the task and that we can spot the appropriate students, we stand to provide them with an opportunity to enter upon what has been classically identified as the best life available. That sounds dramatic, but it is the way of philosophy. The other goals of philosophy classes, the goals that are the concern of the horizontal trajectory, might be well pursued by a philosophically inclined history or literature professor. So, when we are dealing with the students who take only two or three philosophy classes, what are we really accomplishing that could not also be accomplished in other courses? Perhaps we generate in them a better opinion of philosophy than many of our colleagues hold. And thus we secure for ourselves a continued seat at the table, a guaranteed slice of the curriculum. For

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[11] "For education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will haven an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent." W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Tribeca Books, 2013), 19. Quoted by Michael S. Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 65–66.

[12] "There exists now almost all over such an exaggeratedly great number of higher educational institutions that incessantly, endlessly many more teachers are needed for the same than the nature of a people, even with rich aptitudes, is able to beget; and thus an excess of the unfit comes into these institutions, but who gradually, through their overwhelming head count and with the instinct of '*similis simili gaudet*,' determine the spirit of those institutions." Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, trans. Michael W. Grenke (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004), 64–65.

what? To perpetuate our careers? What are we and our careers for? Inculcating an opinion that philosophy is good or, at least, not that bad? Is that not the Cartesian project of disseminating the opinion that philosophy is good for the city?

Precisely that thesis, the belief in the easy harmony of philosophy and the concerns of ordinary life, seems to be the problem. I quote now from Richard Velkley's analysis of the work of Richard Kennington.

> In aiming at universalizable benefits, philosophy as "Enlightenment" must remove from the center of philosophy the sustained openness to the wondrous which cannot be universalized. Yet if the modern founders are seeking to overcome the alienness or strangeness of philosophy, they must first be aware of it. They must admit that the philosopher's passion is somehow unusual. In this awareness they still are linked with the ancients. Their success in overcoming the rift between philosophy and non-philosophy would mean, however, the demise of that awareness. They would found a condition, therefore, in which their act of founding would not be possible. The success of modernity renders its origin unintelligible to its beneficiaries. This is the heart of the present crisis.[13]

The present crisis is the "crisis of European civilization" spoken about by Husserl, Heidegger, and Strauss. Velkley explains that, while modern philosophy was founded by genuine philosophers, their "new kind of thinking endangered the existence of philosophy. Relativism, scientism, nihilism are consequences of modern philosophy's self-subordination to the spheres of 'practice' and history," which are the non-philosophic offspring of modern philosophy.[14] Kennington understood these issues to be encapsulated in the question, now mostly unasked, "Who is the philosopher?" I am suggesting that the same swarm of problems is implicated in determining what we think it means to teach philosophy to undergraduates.

Let me restate the problem on the horizontal plain. As Tocqueville indicated, what Descartes did Americans have absorbed. "If I go further," Tocqueville wrote, "and seek amongst these characteristics of the human mind the principal one which includes almost all the rest, I discover that in most of the

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[13] Richard L. Velkley, "Masks of Mastery: Richard Kennington on Modern Origins," *Political Science Reviewer* 31 (2002): 9.
[14] Ibid., 6–7.

operations of mind, each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding."[15] Eva Brann calls this *rationality*, which is a mode of thinking distinct from reason itself. *Reason* is a power of the mind, which is cultivated by inquiry, by questioning, which is *directed intellectual desire*.[16] Reason is stifled by methodology, by Kantian critique, and similar techniques that artificially limit inquiry before it can begin. *Rationality*, by contrast, is the name for what Tocqueville describes as the peculiarly American turn of mind. She appeals to William James as capturing the "sentiment of rationality" as the feeling of my own intellectual sufficiency, my confidence that no one may impose his ideas on me. I don't have to know anything of importance or, indeed, anything in particular in order to think and decide for myself. Descartes's demand for certainty and the consequent doubt of all authority and of ordinary experience have been received as the right to make up my own mind. "Who is the philosopher?" gives way to "Why do I have to take philosophy?"

Now this is a very different question that arises without a desire to know. It is an expression rather of a right not to need to know. How we answer this question says much about who we are.

Conclusion

When we admit as the *telos* of our teaching wisdom in the highest sense, it is difficult to claim that philosophy is for everyone. Should we settle into the moderate goal of improving the perspicacity of all, for which philosophy proper becomes non-essential, or should we abandon the ordinary student, preserve purity of heart, and pursue without apology the rarefied and classical goal of wisdom to the best of our ability with only the fewest of our very best students?

I doubt we can eliminate the tension between these two poles of education. As interesting as the philosophical problem at the root of our practical problem is, our problem remains practical. I see no

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[15] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* vol. II, bk. 1, ch. 1; as quoted in Eva T. H. Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 121.

[16] Brann describes reason pregnantly as she describes as "the deliberate, self-conscious activity of the original, personal activity of thought."

reason to expect that some new plan will suddenly amend our institutions, alter our colleagues and ourselves, and endow our students with all the intellectual qualities we might dream of. Nor do I think there is a philosophical insight that solves the problem, as if some particular thesis that diagnoses modernity or unravels it would provide a pedagogical solution. That approach, I think, has been interestingly deflated by Haldane. Part of our problem is the presence of too much sophisticated philosophy in education. He recommends adapting Tip O'Neill's thesis that all politics is local to this formula: "most worthwhile educational theory is contextual and practical."[17] No philosophic insight and no institutional scheme can solve the difficulty. Those teachers do best who are alert to the possibilities and the obstacles and pragmatic enough to do whatever can benefit a student who is open to learning. This inclines me to do Haldane and O'Neill one better and say that all education, whenever it happens, is individual. Eva Brann writes, "The effort of the single teacher is the ultimate resort of excellence in education." She continues, "I think, teachers should laboriously form an opinion concerning the foundations of learning and then teach accordingly—alone, if necessary, and in a community of like-minded colleagues, if they are so fortunate."[18] If this captures the situation at St. John's, her advice is all the more compelling for those of us who teach in more ordinary schools.

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[17] Haldane, "Educational Theory," 14.
[18] Eva T. H. Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 5.

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