

A Moderate Traditionalist Approach to Curriculum

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One theme which runs through debate about the curriculum, is the tension between local traditions and the requirements of an increasingly global society. In America, increases in Asian and Hispanic immigration over the last twenty years have also contributed to the pressure for multicultural education; not only may students work for companies who send them to work abroad, but people from different cultural backgrounds may be moving into their neighborhoods and workplaces. Thus I have no intention of denying that the study of cultures other than one's own is educationally valuable. Indeed, to be a truly educated person, one *must* know about at least some culture other than one's own. But in what follows I will express some reservations about what so often goes under the name of multiculturalism, and defend what I would call a moderate traditionalism.

In part my conviction that we need to accord a high priority to giving our students a solid grounding in their own cultural tradition stems from my own experience in the classroom. I will begin, therefore, with pedagogical issues. But there are deeper philosophical issues involved here also about the relation between reason and tradition. So in the second part of this paper I will discuss these issues, and will argue that any attempt to oppose reason and tradition is doomed to failure.

I. The Pedagogical Pitfalls of a "Multicultural" Education

It used to be popular to do something called "teaching from the left." In other words, the teacher began with the assumption that students needed to be shaken out of their complacent adherence to inherited ways of thinking. Teachers, therefore, presented material deeply critical of and antithetical to the cultural traditions from which their students came, hoping thereby to

stimulate students to rethink their views. Now, I would be the last to want to discourage anyone from teaching students to consider and try to respond to objections to their own views. And it is valuable to be able to imaginatively identify with others radically different from oneself and to try to see how the world looks from their point of view. But an increasing number of students are arriving in college with very little knowledge of their own cultural tradition. Feeling unable to clearly articulate or defend their beliefs, they feel threatened when presented with radical challenges to them, and their response is to become angry and clam up. I experience this in the context of a Catholic school, where I find students woefully ignorant of their religious tradition, but the issue is a more general one. A student who feels totally at sea in a confusing and rapidly changing world (and a large number of them do) needs to have a sense of being anchored somewhere. No one can understand the world from every viewpoint; one needs a center. Traditions are in some ways analogous to languages. People grow up with a native language (or in some cases a child may grow up bilingual), but no one can speak every language.

And if those who regard themselves as teaching from the left adopt a strategy of emphasizing all the bad things about the Western tradition, students tend to become demoralized and apathetic. Certainly an American history course which neglected to inform students about slavery, or which omitted the brutal and treacherous way in which Native Americans were treated, would not be historically accurate. But one which dwells at endless length on these sorts of topics and neglects all the positive ideals and the achievements of our ancestors is also doing the students a disservice. After all, they are Americans, and it is for them to continue and build on what is good in their own tradition. As Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out, we find ourselves already imbedded in families and communities, and who we are is bound up with these groups.¹ We enter the scene in the middle of an ongoing story, which we must pick up and continue. Of

course students need to learn to reflect critically about their own tradition, but first they need to know what it is.

A tendency to treat certain highly politicized subcultures as themselves cultures needing to be represented in the curriculum has made "multicultural" education even more destructive. American cultural politics is often quite opaque to people from other countries, so a few words of explanation may be helpful. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960's which fought to obtain the same legal rights for black people as for other Americans has left deep traces in our national psyche, and many subsequent movements for social justice have been understood along the lines of this model. Thus, feminists in the 1970's thought of feminism as a struggle against "sexism" (understood by analogy with racism as discrimination based on sex), and many other "isms" soon followed.

The political ideal of according all groups fair representation and not discriminating against any, then, got carried over into curriculum battles. In the 1970's the same series of groups who had organized themselves politically to defend their members against unfair discrimination began to come forward to press their demands that they and their culture be given fair representation in the curriculum. This has resulted in members of well organized, articulate and aggressive groups being more successful in getting writings by their members included in the curriculum than others. There has, thus, been more emphasis on writings by women or by gay men and lesbians, than on the study of other cultural traditions such as Confucianism or Islam.

But women as such do not have a distinctive culture, nor, I think, do homosexuals. For a culture is a set of beliefs and practices, including at least an implicit picture of the world, transmitted from generation to generation. But women are raised by fathers as well as mothers,

and have sons as well as daughters. In fact their views on most subjects tend to be quite close to those of the men who surround them (or one could of course say that they men tend to have views similar to the women around them). In any case, though, there is as much variation of opinion among women as there is among men on just about any subject. In practice, then, what has passed for the perspective of women has often been feminism, and often that version of feminism prevalent in departments of Women's Studies. Since this sort of feminism very often has a strong undercurrent of hostility to men (or at least to traditional conceptions of masculinity), its prevalence has contributed to a sense of alienation on the part of male students. Traditional women likewise feel alienated. Likewise, homosexuals (male or female) do not constitute a full fledged culture. Homosexuals tend not to have children, and when they do these are often not themselves homosexual. Like the culture of the academic community or of organized crime (we are here dealing with a conceptual rather than a normative issue), gay and lesbian culture are best understood as specialized subcultures, into which some people raised within the larger culture are subsequently introduced. They are parasitic upon the larger tradition rather than a tradition as such.

In short, a great deal of sheer political advocacy has snuck in under the mantle of multiculturalism, and this generates anger and a feeling on the part of students that they are being manipulated. And alienated and angry students quickly become ineducable. They either drop out, or simply give each teacher what they think he or she wants to hear. In either case, they do not seriously engage the intellectual issues. If "multicultural" education were confined to exposing students to at least one other culture in depth, especially if combined with being required to learn the language of the other culture and encouraged to visit and live there for a while, the results, I am inclined to think, would be far more educationally beneficial.

II. Reason and Tradition

The largely anecdotal evidence I have offered so far regarding pedagogical effects of certain sorts of multicultural education cannot carry a great deal of weight, since others will no doubt cite their positive experiences. So rather than pursuing this line of thought further, I will turn in the time that remains, to examine some of the arguments put forward by Martha Nussbaum, who, in her recent book *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), tries to defend a version of multicultural education which includes many of the features I find objectionable.

Close to the heart of her project is the contrast she draws between two opposing versions of liberal education, one of which she calls the traditional view and the other of which is her own view. She sometimes calls her view the Socratic view, but there is a great deal in it from Seneca as well as additions of her own. On her view, the proper goal of education is making students into what she calls "world citizens," and she argues (against conservative critics) that this is now being successfully accomplished by at least a great many of the programs which go under the label of "multiculturalism." A great deal of her support for her view is anecdotal, and I will not quarrel with her over her examples (although in the few cases where I have independent knowledge about a particular professor or program I do not share her sanguine evaluation of them). Instead I will contest some of her underlying assumptions.

I will argue: (1) that her contrast between the two models is a false dichotomy, and that her picture of the traditional view is a straw man, especially if it is intended to be a characterization of the "great books" approach to education; 2) that her own thought is formed very deeply by a particular tradition, although she herself seems to regard her views as the self-evident deliverances of some sort of universal reason; and, 3) that the relation between reason

and tradition is far more complicated than she acknowledges. Reason and tradition cannot be opposed to each other in any simple way, since reason can only operate within a tradition.

1) The traditional view, as characterized by Nussbaum, regards liberal education as a kind of acculturation of elite gentlemen to the traditional values of their society, which relies upon memorization and authoritative texts, discourages questioning and expects students to passively internalize traditional values. Students are to regard their tradition with reverence and seek continuity and fidelity to it. The Socratic model, by contrast, opposes passive acceptance of tradition, and encourages students to engage in self scrutiny, and to question everything. This sort of education is, she thinks, more democratic, because it respects all people's reason and power of choice. Nothing is to be accepted on the basis of authority; all must be submitted to relentless questioning and rational scrutiny, and only what survives such scrutiny is to be embraced. Then, to the Socratic themes, she adds an idea that she takes from the Stoics -- namely that the mind must be challenged to take charge of its own thoughts. What education should produce is people who are "responsible for themselves, people whose reasoning and emotion are under their own control" (*Cultivating Humanity*, p. 30). At this point she slips into a rather interesting locution which occurs often enough in the book to be important -- namely that students must learn to "call their minds their own" or "have ownership of their own thought and speech." (p. 293)

Tradition as she has defined it, then, is the "foe" of Socratic reason (p. 18). But are the only alternatives mindless memorization or throwing out all tradition and embarking on a wholly individual and personal quest to accept only those beliefs which one finds to be conclusively demonstrable by reason? There are any number of defensible positions in between the two she sets out. And those who advocate a "great books" approach to education could not possibly treat

these books as authoritative and passively internalize them for the simple reason that the great books disagree radically with each other. The Western philosophical tradition is not monolithic and is best understood as an ongoing dialogue.

Although her opponent appears to be those who defend a "great books" curriculum, one suspects that at a deeper level she is mounting an attack on traditional religions. These for the most part do rely on authoritative texts which students are expected to regard with reverence (albeit not too much passivity, since they need to interpret their meaning). Furthermore, her attempt to link traditionalism with elitism fails. There is no reason why one could not be both a traditionalist and a democrat. Karl Marx, for example, believed that the masses ought to be given the opportunity to explore the riches of their cultural heritage.

2) Nussbaum herself can hardly claim to be engaging in the sort of relentless probing and searching examination of her own views that she recommends for students -- the fearless willingness to subject one's own tradition to scrutiny and accept only what can be rationally shown. Indeed, she provides no arguments for her own views. Since this is a book on curriculum, a full-fledged defense of her moral and political assumptions might not be necessary -- except for the fact that she sometimes assumes and sometimes insinuates that those who do engage in the sort of relentless rational scrutiny of their views that she recommends, will come out agreeing with her. All her anecdotal examples involve students moving away from traditional views toward hers; none are cited in which a student after careful rational scrutiny decides that the views he or she grew up with are in fact those best supported by reason. And she hints that opponents of interdisciplinary programs focussing on human sexuality oppose them because they are aware on some level that some views will withstand rational scrutiny and others will not (their own, presumably). For example, those who have studied sexuality

historically and cross culturally are, she says, likely to be more tolerant of homosexuality (p. 256).

In other words, those who think deeply and searchingly and familiarize themselves with history and other cultures will all come out believing and desiring the same thing, or at least things sufficiently similar that they will live happily in peace and harmony. But this is just silly. First of all, there is the possibility that the more a person learns about the other the more horrified he or she will become. Familiarity does not always breed love or even tolerance. Second, there is no reason to expect convergence upon the views of Cambridge liberals. Those whose vision of life is more communitarian and traditional than hers very naturally desire to create and sustain social institutions they find congenial and to hand on their tradition to their children. If, then, the sort of hegemonic liberalism she propounds were to be allowed to shape our institutions, the social world thus created would be unfavorable to their way of life. These sorts of conflicts cannot be made to go away, least of all by assuming that all thinking people will come out agreeing with you. This attitude only infuriates one's opponents and makes dialogue harder. *Maybe* everyone can be brought to agree that female circumcision is wrong, and it is possible (although I think less likely) that they can be brought to accept a tolerant attitude toward homosexuality. But maybe not. The only way to find out is to enter into dialogue with them.

Nussbaum, herself, then, is relying on a long tradition of liberal thought, and consequently takes certain assumptions to be beyond question. Her high valuation of autonomy is integral to the high liberal tradition, although she interprets it in a distinctively modern way. For she continually emphasizes the importance of the choice being one's own -- of having ownership of one's own mind. In speaking of the Catholic students at Notre Dame, she says they

must "learn how to subject what they have learned to critical scrutiny, in order to decide how they really want their lives to go" (p. 271). The element of sheer willed choice predominates here in a way it never would for, say, Immanuel Kant (who she cites with approval). He believes in autonomy, but he does so because only by living on self-chosen principles can we live up to our dignity as rational beings and not because we need somehow to get in touch with or decide what we really want.

The pervasive influence of modern liberalism on Nussbaum is shown not only by the assumptions she takes for granted, but also by the narrowness of her own sympathies. Although she emphasizes the importance of having inclusive sympathies and trying to see how the world looks from the point of view of those who are different from oneself, she makes no attempt, when discussing Brigham Young University, to enter into or empathize with the Mormon way of thinking,ⁱⁱ but judges them only according to how well their program measures up by her own criteria. Nor does she manifest inclusive sympathy toward women who disagree with her, being quick to regard them as victims of deformed or diseased preferences caused by the sexist society in which they have grown up (pp 215-221.)

3) Is it possible to escape from tradition? Nussbaum clearly has not done so. But could anyone do so? The desire to break with tradition, start afresh, and believe only what can be established on the basis of reason has been a persistent one in philosophy. It is perhaps most poignantly expressed by Descartes in the *Discourse*, when he says:

"Given the fact that we were all children before being adults and that for a long time it is our lot to be governed by our appetites and our teachers ..., it is almost impossible for our judgments to be as pure or solid as they would have been had we had the full use of reason from the moment of our birth and never been led by anything but our reason."ⁱⁱⁱ

But the idea of having and exercising reason at birth makes no sense. We think in language, and in acquiring language we also acquire ways of dividing the world (colors of the spectrum), knowledge about how and when to apply certain words, and some at least fairly simple logical principles. Hence, as Otto Neurath famously put it, we must repair our ship on the open sea, without ever putting into port.

I do not mean to imply that Nussbaum is philosophically naive enough to say what Descartes said. But she does not seem to realize quite how deeply reasoning is imbedded within tradition, and a great deal of what she does say makes sense only if there is a sort of pure universalistic reason of the sort the Stoics believed in. She accords a place to tradition, but its role is a very truncated one. The great books are to serve as kind of "training weights" for the mind to help us learn to think for ourselves. But if our dependence on tradition is as deep as I am suggesting that it is, it is altogether legitimate to accord a certain amount of weight to that which has been handed on by our tradition (this is after all consistent with making some modifications provided that upon reflection we conclude that they amount to genuine development rather than abandonment of that tradition). She is unwilling to concede a presumption of truth to even the most central assumptions of one's tradition, but always put the burden of proof on the tradition. But to do this is to hamstring tradition so that it cannot do what traditions do -- namely to give us starting points for our thought and guidance in our lives.

Reasoning with people from other traditions is difficult but not impossible. One need not abandon the claims of universal reason, in a more modest form. If our traditions all deal with the same reality, there is reason to hope that they can be brought to converge, at least on some issues. What is wrong with Nussbaum is that she assumes that rational reflection will produce convergence, and convergence on *her* conclusions, quickly and easily. She acknowledges,

when dealing with her opponents, the power of habit and passion to distort our efforts at reasoning, especially about the "pelvic" issues with which she is so centrally concerned. But she neglects the fact that these influences are at work on *all* sides of such issues, including her own.^{iv}

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i See, for example, "The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of Tradition," in *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1984).

ii I am indebted in part for this point to a conversation with Steven Cahn.

iii *Discourse on Method*, Donald A. Cress, tr. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), p. 7.

iv I am grateful to my husband Phil Devine for many fruitful discussions about the material covered in this essay.