



Moral Relativism and the Crisis of Contemporary Education

The very concepts make them profoundly uneasy: Who says virtue is better than vice? Who am I to judge the rightness or wrongness of what someone else chooses? For these students, “tolerance” — that catch-all virtue into which all other virtues have been absorbed — means accepting without question all choices and modes of behavior. They are smart enough to realize that legitimizing the bad choices of others means that they are entitled to the same legitimization for their own bad choices as well, a system of mutually beneficial amorality in which the self-interested embrace of tolerance is enough not only to absolve their own sins, but also to confer upon them a kind of active virtue that grants immunity from the moral and spiritual consequences of their choices.



Both in the classroom and in campus life in general, the consequences of this counterintuitive approach to morality are disconcerting. Beyond the widespread cheating that goes on in class — not even a question of morality, just one of ingenuity and pragmatics, according to one recent survey of students’ attitudes toward plagiarism and cheating — beyond the “hook-up” culture of easy sex and binge drinking, students no longer even recognize a moral component in the decisions they make, from the mundane to the monumental. Much of my interest in this phenomenon stems from trying to teach them the Bible, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Dostoevsky, and C. S. Lewis, the great theological and literary texts of our Judeo-Christian heritage. A few years back, I mentioned in class the Sermon on the Mount. The blank stares caused me to accuse them of laziness, until it was revealed that not one of those 32 students had any idea what the sermon said or who delivered it. Further questioning revealed that 25 of them had been raised as Christians, and 18 of them still considered themselves such. This is altogether typical of our rising generations of students, and the cultural ignorance gets worse from year to year. Like rudderless boats, these kids arrive on campus and immediately drift along with the currents of our morally relativistic university culture.

Recently, one of my students held the position of resident assistant in his dorm, a post of responsibility that included keeping and dispensing university-provided birth control to students under his supervision, including a year’s worth of the “morning after abortion pill,” which he had been given at the start of fall term. He related to the class how his entire supply of these emergency pills had been distributed to students in his dorm the very first weekend of classes in September. Concerned about the instances of moral sclerosis so evident in my own students, I volunteered to teach a few classes at a local Catholic school near the town where I live. Figuring it’s better to light a candle than curse the



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darkness, I offered courses on theology — a class on the Bible and another on Christian writers — hoping to expose them to traditional moral reasoning before they reach the universities.

It had been 25 years since I had set foot in a Catholic high school, and in many ways the place was unrecognizable. The amount of effort that went into shielding kids from a too insistently Catholic message was eye-opening, and my discussions with classrooms full of juniors and seniors, many of whom had been in Catholic schools since kindergarten, revealed an almost complete ignorance of scripture, a staggering inability to articulate any moral position at all, and remarkably vocal disdain for the moral authority of their church. During one discussion about “gay” marriage, almost every single student expressed strong support in favor, and many mocked the Catholic moral position in quite disdainful language. Most alarmingly, when I asked them to explain the Catholic church’s theological position against homosexuality, or to defend their own views, the students were utterly in the dark about the former and completely unable to articulate a single coherent argument in defense of the latter. As discussion continued, I stressed that my concern was not to enforce their conformity to Catholic doctrine, but rather to voice my dismay at their inability to explain the reasons for their defense of gay marriage. The only response they could muster was that “people should be able to do what they want.”

The Origins and Purpose of Humanistic Education

I chose a career in the humanities in part because the study of literature has always — up until very recent times — been associated with making people better, more conscientious moral agents. The Greeks and Romans, respectively, used the words “creator” and “prophet” to describe their poets, and literature was viewed, alongside philosophy, as a school-house of moral virtue and instruction. The Roman poet Horace described the poet-philosopher as one who teaches while delighting, coating the serious moral message of literature with the pleasing veneer of art and story. Readers who delighted in the tales of heroes and quests also encountered, while reading them, high moral examples of courage, determination, and sacrifice, alongside monitory injunctions against cowardice, sloth, and greed. That greatest and most influential collection of moral exempla, the Holy Bible, for all its manifest philosophy, delivers that philosophy more often than not in the form of story, song, adage, or proverb, employing the techniques of drama, irony, foreshadowing, epic, and even tragedy. Christ Himself quite often preferred to deliver His moral teachings in the form of mini-stories called parables, simple and pleasing tales that contained profound philosophy for those who “had ears to hear” the deeper moral message. Indeed, for every tablet of commandments handed down in the Bible or list of formulaic pronouncements, there are dozens of folk stories, dramas, novellas, lyrics, and moral truths rendered artistically and poetically so as to make them pleasing and comprehensible to persons of all educational backgrounds. Rather than traduce the great insights of scripture, the recognition that God frequently chose art and story as the means to reveal His truth to men demonstrates that God Himself is the world’s first and greatest artist. And as the ancients knew all too well, those who sought to recreate and distill the great moral truths of God through art also participated in a sublime act of creation, one that put them as close to divine truth as any calling on Earth.

It was under these attitudes and assumptions that the Western world developed the “humanities” to serve as handmaidens to the great truths of heavenly theology, a discipline that studied truth as revealed by God through scripture. In the wake of theology, each discrete, humanistic discipline codified its contribution to moral truth by virtue of a different human faculty. Thus through philosophy, people employed the faculty of reason in pursuit of truth, while history sought truth through the power



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of memory, and literature and the arts pursued truth through imagination. True, each might borrow from the other: The philosopher Plato famously chronicled his wisdom in the form of dialogues, an artistic device where two characters reveal philosophical import through the artifice of imagined conversation. The poet-dramatist Shakespeare often framed his dramatic message within a well-documented historical event, like the assassination of Julius Caesar. And as we have seen, great sages, saints, and holy men, in imitation of God, have used imaginative storytelling as a way to impart deep moral and philosophical truths. For thousands of years in the West, it was the humanities, as nursed and taught in the schools, which reinforced theology, helping inculcate moral values and instill a love of moral virtue across cultures and in the hearts of individuals.

How Humanistic Education Went Astray

Over the last three centuries, however — a span of time that witnessed the rise of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the dawn of Naturalism and Modernism, and the dominance in our time of Post-Modernism — the Judeo-Christian underpinnings of Western Culture have been shaken, eroded, and ultimately rejected altogether by new, man-centered ways of viewing reality. The rise of science and the unrivaled hegemony of the scientific method — advancements that undeniably increase technological and material comforts for countless billions of human beings — also destroyed the very premises on which moral truth and consensus had been constructed. Faith no longer carried any weight in a world that sought truth only in data that could be verified empirically. Scripture became reduced to mere mythology in the face of our implacable march toward the conquest of nature, the only realm available to the study of physics and biology, based as they are on sensory observation and perception. And as theology became synonymous with superstition, and faith in God the intellectual parallel of believing in unicorns and leprechauns, the transcendent foundation of Western morality — that which kept it all together, anchored in a better world than this, and supported by a Mind much greater than ours — vanished into thin air.

The inevitable rise of moral relativism was a consequence of this metaphysical vacuum, as the Big “T” truths of the past, the moral absolutes upon which any coherent and enduring system of morality depend, were replaced with the utterly subjective little “t” truths of a worldview imprisoned exclusively in nature, an outlook relentlessly hostile to the idea of a transcendent God who created nature and who exists beyond it as the first and greatest of the enduring Truths. Moral relativism, then, is the idea that all non-scientific truths, and especially moral truths, are arbitrary, subjective, and constructed entirely by the mind of man, incorporating all of the prejudices, irrationalities, and limitations of the incomplete perspectives and exclusionary approaches of the cultures that imposed these value systems in the first place. Hence, freed from the shackles of objectivity and utterly divorced from theological certainty, the study of the humanities shifted dramatically. Rather than reinforce ultimate Truth and serve as her compass and school-house, contemporary humanities evolved into a cannibalistic tool of the new scientific method, deconstructing the very notion of objective moral truth and serving only to critique and ultimately condemn as arbitrary the wisdom and moral foundations of the past. In categorically rejecting objective notions of truth and decrying traditional value systems, the humanities — as taught almost without question in schools and universities today — exist to destroy the very principles upon which humanistic learning evolved and nourished civilization, “liberating” culture from the harmful prejudices and hegemonies of traditional religion and morality.

While the shock waves of these philosophical shifts can be witnessed across all fields of human endeavor, it is in education where the consequences of moral relativism are most devastating. For



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thousands of years, the chief aim and civilizing purpose of education had been moral development, an incessant recognition of the limits of human wisdom in the face of the divine, and an insistent reminder of the greater, unseen moral order that underpins the naturalistic world of the jungle, a world where power alone dictates right, and mere survival at any cost equals “truth” in the rawest, most naked sense of the word. Yet the educational paradigms of today — manifested most acutely in the morally relativistic approaches of the humanities — actually reinforce this Darwinian primacy of nature, and work against civilization.

The Consequences of Moral Relativism in Our Schools

It starts at the top, in the journal articles and published books that secure tenure and impose the ideological dictates determining the construction of curricula, the pedagogy taught in graduate programs, and the way we train teachers from kindergarten through high school and beyond. At the highest levels of academia, the tenured professoriate — and the professors, deans, provosts, chancellors, and university presidents who almost always arise from the privileged ranks of this tenured class — there exists a dangerously monolithic echo chamber, where relativistic, post-modern ideas about the world, culture, and truth have become calcified. The consequences to education of this ideological conformity can be witnessed at every level of public, and in many cases private, instruction, for many private schools only hire teachers trained and certified by state-run education programs. The dominance of moral relativism in our humanities curricula, from kindergarten through graduate school, guarantees that the study of philosophy, history, art, and literature amounts to little more than an amoral, un-reflexive acknowledgment of the random, chaotic, arbitrary, and ultimately meaningless nature of “reality.” In this system, the traditional “liberal arts” approach to learning has been transformed into an educational paradigm in which the humanities appropriate the methodology of the sciences in order to strip humanistic learning of any ultimate value or objective whatsoever.

But even more insidiously, the principle of “moral relativity” has been co-opted by academics not only to displace traditional liberal arts education, but also to systematically replace it with the politically tendentious objectives of modern humanities programs. This is the great and glaring contradiction of contemporary post-modern approaches to education, which all claim to view learning through the lens of moral relativism. Beginning from the premise that all moral systems are mere social constructs without any transcendent claims to truth, the modern academic feels justified in exposing the truth claims of previous or competing cultures as bogus, rendering serious consideration of them moot from a moral perspective. Thus there can never exist the possibility that a professor or student might take seriously the faith claims and moral injunctions of Judeo-Christianity. To do so would immediately expose the “believer” as illogical and absurd. For the professor who took seriously these faith claims, the consequences could include professional isolation and even the denial of tenure, while students who persist in believing in the face of moral relativism very often face ridicule, intellectual alienation, and a reduced grade for the course. This worldview, correctly understood, is very much like a sword without a handle: As soon as you seize it to cut down your opponent’s position, you cut off your own fingers; for if moral relativism makes it impossible to take seriously any claim to truth that originates outside a laboratory, then surely that must include the faith claims of contemporary liberalism.

But anyone who has spent meaningful time in our institutions of learning knows just how seriously teachers and academics take their liberal worldviews. If the goal is merely to divorce all meaning and belief from the humanities, then doing so across the board would produce a kind of level playing field, however degraded the resulting view of mankind. But the liberal post-modernism and moral relativity



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that dominate our schools seek to root out traditional values and meanings in order to supplant them with the liberal, materialist creeds of academics — belief-systems every bit as faith-based as those they seek to remove. Despite the obvious contradiction and hypocrisy, liberal academics proceed blithely down this intellectually tortured path by elevating politics to the exalted place in culture formally occupied by morality. The maxim “everything is political” forms a primary commandment in the church of academia, a bit of dogma so unchallenged in academic circles that it might have sprung, fully formed, from the head of Zeus himself, had not the whole concept of deity been rendered superfluous by post-modern dialectics. Although everything cultural might indeed have a “political” dynamic, to use contemporary parlance, that certainly does not prove that all things cultural are merely political, or that they can have no moral or transcendent meaning beyond politics.

Nevertheless, academics today proceed religiously down this path with all the conviction of Saul before he hit the road to Damascus. As G. K. Chesterton observed trenchantly, “When people stop believing in God, they don’t believe in nothing — they believe in anything.” As we have seen, the tearing down and eventual dismissal of traditional morality underpinned by a transcendent God left a vacuum at the very core of civilization and culture. These discredited ideas had given shape and form to the vibrant cultures that grew up in their wake over thousands of years. In their absence, and because they could no longer see Moses on top of the mountain, post-modern academics could not live with the void, and so transformed politics — their politics — into a golden calf before which they continue to do obeisance. Thus the unquestioningly accepted maxim that “everything is political” justifies and privileges — at the expense and derogation of all competing ideas — the myriad leftist, ideological approaches to culture that have choked contemporary education in the humanities. Among the most pervasive of these leftist discourses are Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial studies. In today’s universities, it is almost impossible to encounter philosophy, history, literature, art, or even theology without studying them exclusively through the lens of one or all of these tendentious political perspectives. Because (liberal) politics alone provides a “neutral” platform from which to discuss culture, every painting, novel, historical movement, or economic system has meaning only insofar as it sheds light on the racism, sexism, imperialism, bigotry, or homophobia of Western culture. Thus, almost every single course in the humanities, overtly or implicitly, reduces humanistic study to a mindless and endlessly repetitive exercise in race, class, and gender — the holy trinity of contemporary academic discourse.

We have reached the point in Western education where politically leftist approaches to culture have become institutionally sanctioned, unquestioningly normative, and zealously guarded: They alone offer students a legitimate position from which to analyze and critique culture. The dominance of such worldviews — to the detriment of free inquiry and the perversion of the educational mission — accounts for the overwhelming liberal bias in American education, the uniformly leftist sentiments of faculties and administrators, and the impressive success of schools in churning out factually illiterate, technically incompetent, but politically liberal and increasingly activist graduates. As Abraham Lincoln observed with alarming prescience, “The philosophy of the classroom in one generation, is the philosophy of government in the next.”

Possible Solutions

Despite the current plight of American education, there are some encouraging signs on the horizon. The number of voices who recognize and speak out about the problem is larger than ever before. Access to new media helps disseminate the message and keep it part of the 24-hour news cycle. Recently, serious, non-partisan analysis has begun to emerge that questions the need for a college education at all, as



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costs skyrocket and returns on investment diminish exponentially. It is commonplace to point out that the cost of no commodity in American life has risen as precipitously as college tuition, and every metric indicates that a college degree is no guarantee of employment, or even that students have mastered the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic that were taken for granted in high-school graduates 40 years ago. For the first time in American history, collective student loan debt has surpassed the credit card debt of the entire nation, even as President Obama federalizes the student loan industry to grant easier access to the crushing student loan debt that threatens to impoverish an entire generation of creative writing and women's studies majors. Broke they may be, and facing the prospect of life-long debt, but the President is nonetheless wise to bet that these academically (mis)-trained, chronically disaffected, and underemployed young leftists will continue to vote reliably Democrat for many years to come.

Further, almost all of the Republican or Libertarian challengers vying to run against an Obama second term have pledged to eliminate, or expressed willingness to consider eliminating, the ideologically extreme, shamelessly expensive, and wearily byzantine Department of Education. Another encouraging development is the burgeoning home-school movement, which provides a real threat to the business-as-usual mentality of public schools, allowing parents to supervise their children's educations and supplement their academic studies with traditional exercises in moral education. Various online programs have emerged to assist home-school families in their quest to restore traditional education, most notably FreedomProject Education, which offers online a complete, classical education in the tradition of the Founding Fathers — from kindergarten through high school (in the interest of full disclosure, I am the academic director at FPE).

But regardless of these developments, things will remain dire unless parents, who still control the purse strings, demand meaningful reform and vote with their feet until their voices are heard. This may mean settling on lesser-name universities, branch campuses, or vocational schools for their children, or encouraging kids to consider eschewing higher education altogether in favor of other options, including military service or trade apprenticeships. One thing is certain: Despite the Marxist and anti-capitalist rhetoric emanating from classrooms and faculty lounges all across the country, universities are as much driven by money as the most reviled corporations. Indeed, if you had not just read this essay, it would be tempting to speculate — given the way universities treat their “customers,” charging hugely inflated costs and providing so little of tangible value in return — why there is no “Occupy the Quad” movement to rival the “Occupy Wall Street” crowd. The answer is painfully obvious.

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