

9-2-2004

The Liberal Arts Academy - A Minority Report

W. John Coats

Connecticut College, john.coats@conncoll.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/convo>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Coats, W. John, "The Liberal Arts Academy - A Minority Report" (2004). *Convocation Addresses*. Paper 2.
<http://digitalcommons.conncoll.edu/convo/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College Relations at Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Convocation Addresses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Connecticut College. For more information, please contact bpancier@conncoll.edu.

The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author.

"The Liberal Arts Academy - A Minority Report"

[Wendell John Coats, Jr.](#), Professor of Government

Recipient of the 2003 Nancy Batson Nisbet Rash Faculty Research Award for excellence in research

Delivered at the 90th Convocation, Connecticut College, September 2, 2004.

Since this duty has fallen on me this year as recipient of last year's Rash Award, I thought I might take it seriously and use the occasion to say something serious. In exchange for your indulgence in this regard for a quarter hour, I promise to try to be lively and, hopefully, even say something interesting.

In keeping with the College's current interest in diversity of viewpoints, I'd like to present and polish up for you this evening a view of liberal arts education which has not been heard recently, especially in the pragmatic culture of this country. And when I get it out there, I'm sure some of you will say that it should be relegated to the dustbin of history — but then, that is the element of wisdom in the institution of tenure — to make possible the articulation of points of views which may be out of season but which still merit a hearing and may still have something to teach us. Also, when I finish presenting what to some of you may sound a very impractical view of liberal education, out of deference to the pragmatism of our culture (for no one can jump over her own shadow), I'll try to indicate some of the practical benefits which flow from this ostensibly impractical view of liberal education.

Rather than try to create a false drama of inquiry and in keeping with my promise of brevity, I'll begin, very 'un-Socratically,' with my conclusions, and then try to flesh them out for you, as a way of defending them in a brief time.

The view I have to present 'a view clearly at odds with the current emphases on 'relevance' and political and social 'consciousness raising' ' is of the liberal arts academy as a 'place apart.' By this phrase, I mean a place apart from the various practical and technical and political concerns and struggles which have dominated the civilized conversation for at least the past three centuries, and now threaten to take it over; I mean a place where our entire civilized inheritance can be reflected upon, not just its practical dimensions; a place where the best parts of this inheritance can be passed on to succeeding generations through cultivation of habits and arts of discriminating insight and judgment. In brief, if there is a 'mission' or 'function' of liberal arts institutions, on the view I am presenting, it is the very general one of passing on to others an entire civilized inheritance, rather than simply a passage or two in it, and most certainly distinguished from the contemporary project of 'plundering history' for examples to support the political project of the moment, or to 'sniff out' ideas and

practices at odds with our particular moral sensibilities and values. Perhaps a good way of making clearer what I have in mind by all of this is to explore the implications of the phrase 'cultivation of habits and arts of discriminating insight and judgment.'

By this phrase I have in mind something like the French expression that the truth is in the nuances ('la verité' reste dans les nuances'), combined with Hegel's claim that the 'truth is the whole' ('Das Wahre is Das Ganze').

These two insights together imply for me that it is possible to approach the past, i.e., our civilized inheritance, critically, but in a discriminating manner. For me, this means, in the humanities and social sciences, teaching about entire civilizations and cultures in sufficient detail that we come to understand the choices they represent from the standpoint of those who made those choices; in sufficient detail that we can make discriminating judgments about how we would have behaved in similar, comprehensive circumstances; discriminating judgments about whether we think we are really superior 'morally and intellectually' to our forebears or whether we are simply standing on their shoulders, shoulders which may be broader than our own. And even limited critical judgments such as these would arrive only after (almost as an afterthought) the sheer excitement and curiosity to understand a way of life simply for the sake of understanding.

This idea of coming to understand simply for the sake of understanding may sound to practical ears a very self-indulgent idea, but, in fact, I want to suggest that it too has a practical function (though not a narrowly construed, political one) in a healthy civilization. History teaches us that vibrant, vital civilizations require some protected space where understanding can be pursued for its own sake, without being tied to the requirement to produce or show immediate practical benefits 'political, scientific, technical, or other. The reason for this is obvious, but it is worth stating. If the horizon of knowledge is narrowed to what seems germane to a desired practical outcome, e.g. a certain minimum aggregate score on secondary school achievement tests (the problem of 'teaching for the test'), then important principles of knowledge which seem irrelevant to the concerns of the practical problems at hand are omitted in general education.

But, then, when the practical problems facing us change and we require knowledge of principles which have been omitted, those facing them are at a loss, or are ill-prepared; and more generally, as the 20th century English philosopher of science, Alfred North Whitehead, observed (in some famous lectures on the biological function of reason), the imaginative, creative faculty itself tends to dry up in individuals and civilizations which curtail it or tie it to the demand for immediate practical results. Here is Whitehead on the ancient Egyptians and ancient Greeks:

'It is surprising that a scheme of such abstract ideas [as mathematical physics]

should have proved of such importance. We can imagine that an Egyptian country gentleman at the beginning of the Greek period might have tolerated the technical devices of his land surveyors, but would have felt the airy generalizations of the speculative Greeks were tenuous, unpractical, a waste of time. The obscurantists of all ages exhibit the same principles and all common sense is with them. Their only serious antagonist is History, and the history of Europe is dead against them. Abstract speculation has been the salvation of the world \ speculations which made systems and then transcended them, speculations which ventured to the furthest limits of abstraction. To set limits to speculation is treason to the future (emphasis added).'

(Incidentally, in this little book, Whitehead argues that the biological function of reason is to rescue the human creative impulse from chaos and anarchy.)

It is for this reason that I talk of the liberal arts college, and the university generally, as 'a place apart' from practical concerns. It represents just the right time and place for the performance of this civilized function \ the right time in the lives of students, and the right place in the life of our society as a whole.

Let us briefly unpack this last idea about the liberal arts academy (and universities generally) being the right time and place to cultivate understanding and speculative intellect for their own sake, for the sheer excitement of understanding and discovery, both of self and of the world, without (for a brief moment in life) any concern for the future, for what will be done with such discoveries. Primary and secondary school is, with us, concerned with civic education and more generally with what the sociologists call 'socialization.' Along with (one hopes) passing on some acquaintance with the fundamentals of various academic and athletic disciplines, the aim is to initiate students into a civilization, curb their natural egoism, and teach them their duties toward one another. And, on the other hand, professional schooling and advanced graduate schools are clearly about learning a profession. It is only in this four-year hiatus between socialization and professionalization that there is reasonable chance for understanding to be cultivated for its own sake; a clearance for the imagination to be stretched, deepened, and nourished as a future source of creativity and fertility. If we encroach upon this hiatus from either side, that is, by extending the socialization of secondary school through programs for political and social 'consciousness - raising,' or extending the professionalization of the professional schools through heavy emphasis on 'relevance' and 'service learning' \ we risk drying up at a formative stage in students' lives wells of imaginative creativity, or, to shift metaphors, we risk a harsh narrowing of the horizons within which imaginative creativity may arise for dealing with all sorts of contingencies, practical, artistic, and so on. If there is to be an institutionalized period in the lives of individuals for the cultivation of imaginative and speculative intellect and curiosity for its own sake, then this four-year period would seem to be, and has proven to be in the past, the right time for it.

Yet, I've also suggested that from the standpoint of society and civilization at

large, the college is the right place for cultivation of the understanding solely for the sake of understanding. The natural insulation of the college's cloistered walls already provides a circumstantial and symbolic representation of its role as a 'place apart' from the practical concerns of society at large. Yet, when we look more deeply into it, we can see that these physical characteristics are expressions of an insight about the importance of keeping learning in this place as isolated as possible from the practical and political concerns of the moment. This insight is valid for all times, but especially for our own, when the home-grown pragmatism of our own culture has grafted itself onto the latest mutations of a 19th century European inheritance ' the 'power ideologies' of the extreme right and extreme left, as originally formulated in the thought of Nietzsche and Marx, respectively. Arguably, one of the gravest dangers to the continued identity of colleges as institutions of higher learning resides in the prevalent viewpoint that all interesting questions now are questions of power (who really has it? who doesn't? how do manners and language reflect it? how to re-distribute it?), and that all history, including apparently even art history, should now be looked at principally from this perspective, for looking at history any other way tacitly supports existing power relationships. This viewpoint is well known and finds its most undisguised statement in the writings of the father of the political atheism of the far right, Friedrich Nietzsche, but it now appears across the political spectrum from right to left. Yet the dangers it presents to those who would adopt it as the basis for liberal arts pedagogy are at least worth making explicit. For by reducing all questions to questions of power, or by ignoring all questions which cannot be construed in terms of power, we close off a great deal of our past inheritance and limit our future horizons. We also risk creating the impression that we are now a political institution, and we should not be surprised if the tolerance and patience of society outside our walls grows thin with us for abusing our long and hard-won insulation from the realm of practical affairs. For there are groups and institutions aplenty out there with political and social agendas ' but our unique 'mission' if we may be said to have one ' for our society and civilization as a whole ' is arguably to keep alive the pursuit of understanding solely for its own sake; and also to allow society to reap the practical benefits of preserving academic islands of abstraction, i.e., the practical benefits of imaginative creativity and detached moral lucidity. (There is a curiously symmetrical irony on the world scene now in the fact that just as the former totalitarian systems of eastern Europe are doing their best to re-invent the pluralism of civil society, we in the Western academies seem bent on erasing the lines between civil society and politics and secular religion. I say this is 'curious' because it is obvious that the decline of those political systems was owing to the stultification which comes from extending political control too far into social life.) In this connection it is illuminating to look at the thoughts of a practical statesman and military hero of reflective temperament. Near the close of his life, in an interview in 1969 with Andr  Malraux, Charles de Gaulle, founder of the current French republic, made the following observations about the relationship of theory to practice in the broadest sense:

‘You see, there is something that cannot go on: the irresponsibility of the intellect. Either that will stop or Western civilization will stop — Intellect could be concerned with the soul, with the cosmos, as it was for so long. Instead it has concerned itself with temporal life, with politics in the broad sense. The more it is concerned with politics, the more irresponsible it becomes. [Felled Oaks V114]’ Rather than finish on such a gloomy and critical note, I’ ll conclude rather with some timelessly relevant thoughts from a teacher in another time and place, another century and country, about why one goes to a good school:

‘ ‘ You go to a [good] school not so much for knowledge as for arts and habits; for the habit of attention, for the art of expression, for the art of assuming at a moment’ s notice a new intellectual position, for the art of entering quickly into another person’ s thoughts, for the habit of submitting to censure and regulation, for the art of indicating assent or dissent in graduated terms, for the habit of regarding minute points of accuracy, for the art of working out what is possible in a given time, for taste, discrimination, for moral courage ‘ Above all you go to a [good] school for self-knowledge. [Quoted in RP, 200]’

Yet we should also note that these observations of an Eton headmaster were made about secondary schooling, not university, and that the detailed comprehensive knowledge of previous ways of life and various academic disciplines passed on at college are necessary as well to rescue such habits of discriminating judgment from mere idiosyncrasy.

I’ ll conclude with a bit of ‘preachy’ advice to the Class of ‘08: in so far as prudently possible, use the isolation and insulation of the next four years to cultivate, broaden and deepen your understanding for its own sake, for the sheer excitement of discovery. The ancient Japanese Samurai warriors are reported to have had a maxim that said, ‘In a 50-50 life-and-death situation, choose death.’ I do not think the maxim implies ‘choose to die,’ but rather that achieving the capacity for indifference to the outcome of a ‘50-50 life-and-death struggle’ is likely to increase your performance level or skill in combat. In a similar vein, I’ m suggesting that, if your overriding goal in life is practical success, you are more likely to achieve a high level of it by cultivating your understanding for its own sake while you are here. For one thing, it builds habits of courage to be indifferent to immediate outcomes (such as whether or not you get an ‘A’ on any particular exam); for another, it will deepen the wells of imagination and creativity at your disposal in future practical problem-solving; and, for another, it will increase your self-knowledge to gain a detached and detailed knowledge of other times and places, for only a detached and detailed understanding of other times and places can give you realistic idea of how you might have behaved in similar circumstances.

Thank you.