

The Meaning of Plurality in Liberal Education

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Abstract: This essay explores the ways in which plurality and discourse are essential to the purpose of liberal education. By drawing on the work of Aristotle, Michael Oakeshott, and Jürgen Habermas, among others, the features and function of this plurality are explored at a theoretical level. This essay ends by applying this theoretical discussion to the more practical question of the role and place of a Western Canon within liberal education.

Keywords: Liberal Education, Liberal Learning, Plurality, Conversation, Discourse, Michael Oakeshott, Aristotle, Jürgen Habermas, Paul Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Western Canon

PLURALITY AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

Liberal education is inherently *plural*. This is partly a historical claim supported by the fact that over the course of its long history, throughout the many changes in content and pedagogy that it has undergone, liberal learning has always been an education in *multiple* subjects. This has distinguished it from other types of education such as those concerned only with preparing the student for a single craft or trade. This plurality of subjects means that students of liberal education are introduced to a variety of different ways and methods of understanding the world. Between and within these multiple disciplines of study, there are often conflicting and competing views to which students are exposed. Finally, the physical context of liberal education is often marked by a plurality of other students and teachers, each with their own preferences and backgrounds. The goal of this essay is to more closely examine the plurality at the heart of liberal learning, and in so doing, clarify the purpose and function of liberal education.

The first three sections of this essay lay the theoretical groundwork for thinking about the meaning of plurality in liberal learning. The first section, by looking primarily at the work of Aristotle and Michael Oakeshott, establishes an inherent connection between liberal learning and the practice of politics, if politics is understood broadly as the discourse or conversation that goes on within a community about how that community should arrange itself. The claim in this section is that liberal learning is an introduction to and initiation into this discourse. The second section examines the concepts of discourse and conversation through the work of Paul Ricoeur and Charles Taylor. This section

argues that an important feature of conversation is the way in which it leads to a “surplus of meaning” that allows for the creation of new ideas and new modes of understanding ourselves and the world. The third section, through a treatment of Jürgen Habermas’s concepts of *communicative action* and *communicative rationality*, looks at the “rules” which govern this discourse. The fourth and final section of the essay applies the theoretical groundwork established in the previous sections to a concrete contemporary debate within liberal education—the question of the “Western Canon” and its place in education. This section aims to show how the concept of conversation and discourse as laid out here can provide some clarification and guidance when thinking through questions of curriculum design.

The main goal of this essay is simply to elucidate what liberal education is, what its goals are, and how it goes about achieving these. It is only after this is understood that meaningful discussion can be had about this type of education’s value. This essay ends with some reflections on the value and promise of liberal education. There are many who will remain unpersuaded, convinced instead that the goal of liberal education—an initiation into the practice of cultural discourse—is a naive or frivolous one in today’s world. For those people, the hope is that this essay at last clarifies what is at stake, for the alternative to discourse, the alternative to conversation, is manipulation, coercion, and war.

LIBERAL EDUCATION AND POLITICS

The image of conversation, or of discourse, and its connection with liberal learning informs much of what will be said here, and this connection can be attributed primarily to the work of Michael Oakeshott. In his essay *A Place of Learning*, which was first delivered as a talk at Colorado College in 1974, Oakeshott states:

Perhaps we may think of [the] components of a culture as voices, each the expression of a distinct and conditional understanding of the world and a distinct idiom of human self-understanding, and of culture itself as these voices joined, as such voices could only be joined, in a conversation—an endless unrehearsed intellectual adventure in which, in imagination, we enter into a variety of modes of understanding the world and ourselves and are not disconcerted by the differences or dismayed by the inconclusiveness of it at all. And perhaps we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversational relationship and thus to make our *début dans la vie humaine* (Oakeshott 1989a, p. 30).

This image of a conversation appears across multiple works by Oakeshott, and it expresses his understanding of what it means to be a human who is born into, learns about, and participates in a particular culture and tradition, as all people invariably are and do. It is notable that the primary feature of this image is not the particular content or curriculum of the conversation, but rather the multiplicity of voices that compose it—in a word, the *plurality* of the conversation. As Oakeshott points out, a conversation is “impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 490). While “there is no fixed number to the voices which engage in this conversation”, the ones that Oakeshott addresses most explicitly across his own work are those of science, history, and poetry. Each of these voices represents a distinct mode of understanding the world. The voice of science, for example, is concerned primarily with constructing “a rational world of consequentially arranged conceptual images” (Oakeshott 1991, p. 506). In other words, it is interested in concepts like “causality” and “facts”. Poetry, on the other hand, is mainly concerned with finding and expressing delight in the world and in human existence.

Since Oakeshott positions liberal education as an initiation into this practice of conversation, it is fair to ask: Why is it important for somebody to be familiar with multiple modes of understanding? Why should somebody not specialize in one mode at the expense of all others? The answer to this question lies in considering the connection between liberal education and politics.

This connection has been asserted since at least Ancient Greece. In Book Eight of his *Politics*, Aristotle distinguishes between “free” and “unfree” types of education, which has often been translated as “liberal” and “illiberal” education. The word he uses to describe a free education is *eleutherios* which is related to the word *eleutheros*, meaning freedom or a free person (e.g., not a slave). But *eleutherios* also carries the specific connotation of speaking and acting in a way that is befitting of a free person. In the context of Aristotle’s Athens, this free speech and action is largely realized through participation in the democratic governance of the polis. It is notable, then, that even in its ancient form, liberal education was connected to a certain kind of speech and deliberation. However, Aristotle also claims that a free education is free because it is for its own sake, not for the sake of something or somebody else (Aristotle 2013, 1337b-1338b). As will be shown, these multiple types of freedom are connected.

In contrast to later thinkers like Hobbes who described the original and natural state of humans as one devoid of formal political communities, Aristotle famously claims that “man is by nature a political animal” (Aristotle 2013, 1253a). This statement reflects Aristotle’s belief that politics is a natural result of the human inclination to pursue happiness because it is only within a political community that people can live well and be happy. Thus, a city (the most appropriate size for a political community according to Aristotle) is a naturally occurring human community that is “for the sake of a life that is the best possible” (Aristotle 2013, 1328a). An essential aspect of Aristotle’s thought here is that, for him, happiness (*eudaimonia*), which is the ultimate goal of life, is not a kind of stupor or stasis in which people simply exist while doing nothing else, and it is not only the leisurely contemplation of philosophic ideals à la Plato. For Aristotle, happiness “is a sort of action” (Aristotle 2013, 1325a). Specifically, happiness is “the actualization of virtue and a certain complete practice of it” (Aristotle 2013, 1328a).

For this essay, the important aspect of Aristotle’s theory of virtue is that he believed the practice of happiness and virtue was most fully realized within a political community, or, more pointedly, through *participation* in a political community. Now, the type of person who most fully participates in a political community is a citizen. A citizen, however, is not somebody who merely lives in a political community, but “in an unqualified sense is defined by no other thing so much as by partaking in decision and office” (Aristotle 2013, 1275a). A citizen, either by holding direct office or participating in political deliberation, takes part in the governance of their own political community. And in the best regimes where all participating members are equal citizens, citizens are therefore both “ruling and being ruled in turn” (Aristotle 2013, 1332b).

In this context, then, Aristotle positions a “free” education as one that prepares citizens to act virtuously and pursue happiness through participation in politics and in leisure (a still necessary ingredient for happiness in his mind). The content of this education that Aristotle proposes, brief though it is, is focused mainly on developing the character of a person so that they are able to act in ways that are conducive to virtue in various situations.

At this point it is possible to see how Aristotle can imply that liberal education is both for its own sake and for the sake of preparing citizens to govern. Because happiness is for its own sake and not the sake of something else, and because a political community exists to actualize the happiness of its citizens, an education that prepares citizens to be part of their political community, to be citizens who are both rulers and ruled, is itself free of utilitarian *illiberal* ends because it too exists for the sake of the happiness of its citizens.

By following Aristotle this far, the argument has diverged somewhat from Oakeshott’s own beliefs regarding politics and education. In Oakeshott’s writings, politics does not always have the same high status that it does for Aristotle, and political participation is certainly not the primary ingredient to happiness. In no uncertain terms Oakeshott writes, “A universal preoccupation with rights, interests, affairs of government, political questions in general is fatal to the public peace & individual happiness” (Oakeshott 2014, p. 429). However, when Oakeshott extricates political activity from its immediate concern with “affairs of government”, his stance on it softens.

Oakeshott's essay *Political Education* contains what is perhaps his most well-known passage on politics:

In political activity, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbor for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep [the ship] afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behavior in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion (Oakeshott 1989b, p. 177).

For the subject at hand, the important part here is that Oakeshott frames political activity as the use of a "traditional manner of behavior" that guides a community when it is confronting the various decisions it must make. Oakeshott understands *tradition* to be the entire corpus of customs, beliefs and behaviors that are characteristic of a community. It is neither a "fixed nor inflexible" thing, nor is it a "groove into which we are destined to grind out our helpless and unsatisfying lives". Instead, a tradition grows and adapts to the various circumstances in which a community finds itself. But though it may evolve and change, no person or group can ever be free of their tradition; the only resources a community has to guide its actions and decisions are the "fragments, the vestiges, the relics of its own tradition of behavior" (Oakeshott 1989b, pp. 176-178). This view of tradition is consciously broad and open-ended because, in Oakeshott's mind, any attempt to abridge a tradition into a clear and succinct form inevitably transforms it from a complex living reality into the ossified strictures of ideology (Oakeshott 1989b, pp. 167-172). It follows from tradition's capaciousness and the fact that political activity is primarily an exercise in putting tradition to work, that political activity encompasses an equally wide range of activities that go far beyond the day-to-day concerns of politicians, elections, etc. Oakeshott describes it as a "universal activity" in which "every member of the group...has some part and some responsibility" (Oakeshott 1989b, p. 160).

From all that has been said, it should come as no surprise that Oakeshott views the type of education that prepares one to take part in politics, what he calls "political education", as precisely an education in a community's "traditional manner of behavior". This education's breadth should match that of the tradition itself, and so Oakeshott writes, "there is little or nothing in the world which comes before us as we open our eyes that does not contribute to it" (Oakeshott 1989b, p. 180). However, given the capaciousness of Oakeshott's understanding of both political activity and political education, it makes sense to ask if there is much that distinguishes a *political* education from a *liberal* education. The answer, it seems, is mostly no. In fact, the image of a conversation, tied so closely to Oakeshott's description of a liberal education, appears again in his discussion of political education. He writes, "Political education is not merely a matter of coming to understand a tradition, it is learning how to participate in a conversation: it is at once an initiation into an inheritance in which we have a life interest, and the exploration of its intimations" (Oakeshott 1989b, p. 179).

It is important to stress, however, that although liberal education is tied to a certain conception of politics, it is not the same thing as the actual practice of politics. This is because an essential aspect of liberal education is its semi-secluded character. When speaking of institutions of liberal learning, Oakeshott writes that they are "sheltered enough from the demands of utility to be undistracted in their concern with [learning]" (Oakeshott 1989a, p. 15). An institution of liberal learning is "a place apart" that allows those who inhabit it to engage in the practice of learning without the pressure to arrive at any clear conclusions or policy proposals. Thus, while political deliberation necessarily has a (momentary) end point in a particular decision, the conversation of liberal education is free from pressure to arrive at any kind of final resolution. It is open-ended, and places of liberal learning provide students the opportunity to *practice* the kind of deliberation that might occur in politics without the pressure to reach any kind of conclusion. What this deliberation looks like will be the topic of later sections of this essay.

However, though it might be importantly sheltered in certain ways, a liberal education is still one in which students learn to participate in a particular culture and tradition. Thus, this culture and tradition

are its object and its incitement. When students at last leave their institution of liberal learning behind, they will have gained a deeper understanding of this culture and of themselves—for they, being born into a particular culture, are shaped by it—and they will be better prepared to be participants in the conversation that is their cultural inheritance.

It is now possible to see some similarities between Aristotle and Oakeshott when it comes to their views on education, and these similarities point towards an essential task and purpose of liberal learning. For both thinkers, there is an inescapable link between education and politics. Though their views on the purpose and character of political activity differ somewhat, they both define politics in broad terms as the culmination of the entire way of life of a community. Liberal education is an education for those who are full participants in the community, and it is an introduction into and preparation for being a full member of a community, its culture, and its traditions. Both thinkers, though they identify a core connection between politics and education, remove liberal learning from the immediate questions of elections, candidates, and ideologies, and instead insist on a non-utilitarian aspect of liberal education. Still, this conception of education embeds it within a particular community since liberal learning is a formal and explicit introduction into a community's complex culture and tradition.

The preceding discussion sheds some additional light onto Oakeshott's image of a conversation and the various voices or "modes of understanding" that constitute it. Education is an exposure to the entire culture of a community, and, as Oakeshott writes in *A Place of Learning*, culture is composed of "a variety of distinct languages of understanding, and its inducements are invitations to become acquainted with these languages, to learn to discriminate between them, and to recognize them...as the most substantial expressions we have of human self-understanding" (Oakeshott 1989a, p. 29). But why should there be multiple modes of understanding in each culture? The answer to this question is perhaps obvious, but worth emphasizing. It is because, as Hannah Arendt succinctly puts it, "men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (Arendt 1998, p. 7). It is because of the fact of *plurality*. Even the Greek city-state, which contained a relatively homogenous collective of citizens, is, as Aristotle observes, "made up of dissimilar persons" (Aristotle 2013, 1277a). The result of this *intra*-communal plurality is that a community's culture and tradition are actually a constellation of multiple ways of understanding and being in the world. It is these various modes of understanding that represent the "voices" in Oakeshott's conversation, and liberal learning's goal is a familiarization with these voices so that students can become full participants in the conversation of their community.

DISCOURSE AND THE SURPLUS OF MEANING

The brute fact of plurality is only the beginning of the story, however. The multiple voices that characterize a conversation are not each engaged in a monologue of which the other voices are unaware. A defining feature of conversation is that the participants *address* one another; they speak to each other and listen to what the other participants have to say. In other words, conversation is *intersubjective*. And so, an essential characteristic of a liberal education is that students are not only exposed to various modes of understanding through the courses and departments of a university or college; students are also asked, so to speak, to put these classes and disciplines in conversation with one another. Thus, a liberal education is not only multi-disciplinary, but also *inter*-disciplinary.

It is worth pausing over this point and asking: Why? Why is it important that liberal education be interdisciplinary? To answer this question, it is helpful to first look at the effects of this intersubjectivity. This is not something that Oakeshott addresses explicitly, but in his more rhapsodic moods he seems to hint that something beyond just talking is happening when seemingly disparate voices engage in conversation. In his essay *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*, Oakeshott writes:

In conversation, 'facts' appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; 'certainties' are shown to be combustible, not by being brought into contact with other

‘certainties’ or with doubt, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. Thoughts of a different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions (Oakeshott 1991, p. 489).

In his reference to “fresh exertions”, Oakeshott seems to be gesturing towards an important function of conversation. It may be helpful to approach the precise nature of this function of conversation by looking at the 1976 essay *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. In this essay, Ricoeur discusses the nature and function of metaphor. It is striking how much his description of what happens in the linguistically brief instance of a metaphor—perhaps no more than a few words—mirrors elements of Oakeshott’s description of the millennia-spanning conversation that is culture.

In Ricoeur’s telling, the chief feature of a metaphor is *tension*—a tension between two seemingly disparate or incongruous images. An example he uses is that of “a mantle of sorrow”. The terms “sorrow” and “mantle” do not, at face value, go together because sorrow is not a piece of clothing. Understanding a metaphor, then, depends on more than comprehending the individual words that make up the metaphor; it is a task of interpretation that begins with the “self-destruction” of the literal meaning of the metaphoric utterance. In place of this literal meaning, an unexpected kinship appears between two images “where ordinary vision does not perceive any relationship” (Ricoeur 1976, pp. 50-51). Or, as Oakeshott puts it above, “approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another”. The effect of this tension and unexpected kinship is that a metaphor can cause, “a new, hitherto unnoticed, relation of meaning to spring up between terms that previous systems of classification had ignored or not allowed” (Ricoeur 1976, p. 51). In other words, the tension between seemingly incongruous images or competing voices of a conversation can be a fruitful one that reveals something new about the world.

Consider the following passage from Annie Dillard’s *A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*:

Under the world’s conifers—under the creek side cedar behind where I sit—a mantle of fungus wraps the soil in a weft, shooting out blind thread after frail thread of palest dissolved white. From root tip to root tip, root hair to root hair, these filaments look and wind...King David leaped and danced naked before the ark of the Lord in a barren desert. Here [where I sit] the very looped soil is an intricate throng of praise (Dillard 2007, p. 97).

The images that Dillard places in tension here are that of King David dancing in the desert and the web of fungus stretching underground—certainly two dissimilar images. But the effect of her decision to claim a resemblance between them is that the reader is invited to see the natural world as one whose very form is a song of praise to creation. For those responsive to this invitation, reading Dillard can engender a startlingly novel kind of experience where “a new vision of reality springs forth, which ordinary vision resists because it is attached to the ordinary use of words” (Ricoeur 1976, p. 68). As the author Ted Chiang, a self-avowed atheist, said about *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, “Reading that book gave me maybe the closest [experience] that I’m likely to get to understanding a kind of religious ecstasy” (Klein and Chiang 2021). In Chiang’s case, then, it can be said that Dillard’s writing truly produced a new kind of experience that was formerly inaccessible.

Metaphor, however, is only one example of productive tension. A similar dynamic can be found beyond the relatively self-contained level of the sentence in the much wider and turbulent level of culture writ large. In his book *The Language Animal*, philosopher Charles Taylor lays out the process by which the ancient Greeks may have first arrived at what they later called “equality”:

Citizens come to find certain established restrictions on speech, in favor of kings, or tyrants, or a narrow group of nobles, irksome and objectionable. They object, protest, and demand to be heard. The new norms arise out of this protest; they become internalized, and they find the appropriate

new coinages in the conflictual exchange. We articulate the new norms, give them their names. The new words we coin in the process of articulation define and give shape to what we are demanding...In this case the agency is not an individual thinker...it emerges out of a deliberating community, in often conflictual exchange. The creativity here essentially belongs to discourse (Taylor 2016, pp. 281-283).

In this telling, the beginning of the process which led to the Greek notion of equality was the experience of a tension—the tension between the demands of rulers and the desires of those who were ruled. Taylor claims that the Greek idea of the equality of citizens was genuinely new, it was something that, for example, a visitor from nearby Persia would not have understood; they would have known what it meant to be of equal height or equal strength, but the concept of equal citizenship and the norms that it encapsulated for the Greeks would have represented something unprecedented for the Persian (Taylor 2016, p. 281). However, the formalization of a set of customs into a concept like equality is only one step in what Taylor describes as an endless hermeneutic circle—norms develop and grow in response to some felt tension; these norms then become interpreted and formalized into an idea or concept like equality, democracy, human rights; the formalization of these norms creates new tensions which lead to new norms; and the process continues all the way to the present day where the contemporary norms denoted by the term “equality” are very different than those in Ancient Greece.

The most important point to emphasize here is that Taylor describes this process as a “discourse”. The equality of citizens in Ancient Greece emerged “out of a deliberating community”. It was, in other words, the product of conversation. The beginning of this conversation, and the fuel that continued to power it, was the *tension* between competing images of the world—that of the ruler and that of the ruled. Given all that has been said, it is possible to claim that these competing images of the world are analogous in many ways to Oakshott’s various “modes of understanding” that “take wing and play round one another” in the “conversation of mankind”. What both Ricoeur and Taylor help to clarify about this conversation is that its result—the result of an idea “being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order”—is often the creation of *new norms*, *new ideas*, and *new meanings*. It is through this process that cultures and traditions are continually reconstituted.

At this point, it is possible to return to the question with which this section began—Why is it important that liberal education be interdisciplinary?—and give an answer. First, recall the claim of the previous section: liberal education is a necessarily *political* education in that it prepares students to participate in and be members of a plural community. This section built on this claim by examining how the tensions engendered by a plural community full of competing viewpoints and modes of understanding can sometimes be productive ones that play a necessary role in the development a community and its culture. It follows, then, that if liberal education is to prepare students to be participants of a plural community, it should familiarize them with this process. In order to do so, students participate in this process itself within their institution of liberal learning by being asked to put the various modes of understanding to which they are introduced in conversation with each other, to explore the tensions that inevitably arise, and to embrace the possibility that these tensions will lead to discoveries that are illuminative of existing modes of understanding or even open the path towards new understandings.

THE ROLE OF REASON(S) IN LIBERAL LEARNING

The previous section described a process by which the identity, tradition, and culture of a community develops. This process was called *discourse*, and it involves placing seemingly disparate or even opposing ways of viewing the world into conversation with each other, and then transforming the resulting differences into productive tensions that may possibly point towards new understandings and ways of being in the world. This process contains both a descriptive and a moral element. It is descriptive because it outlines an important mechanism through which culture develops without explicitly claiming whether this mecha-

nism is good or bad. There is a moral component, however, because in order for the mechanism of discourse to function, its participants must be committed to certain conversational norms.

There are of course other ways of responding to differences of opinion that have little to do with making the resulting tensions productive. The goal could instead be to marginalize or eliminate one of the opposing viewpoints while establishing the other as dominant. The concept of discourse or conversation as a productive force within culture represents, then, an implicit rejection of more combative, violent, or authoritarian approaches to resolving cultural tensions. However, in order to make tension productive, there must still be some process for working through differences of opinion.

Neither Oakeshott, nor Ricoeur, nor Taylor spend much time looking at the inner workings of conversation and discourse, and it is at this stage that the thought of Jürgen Habermas can provide some guidance. Habermas has spent much of his career examining the procedures and processes that underwrite what has been described here as discourse or conversation, and what Habermas calls *communicative action*. The equivalence between Oakeshott's concept of conversation and Habermas's communicative action is admittedly not a perfect one; Habermas furnishes communicative action with a level of formality and detail that is lacking in Oakeshott's descriptions of conversation, and communicative action generally culminates in a particular decision, while Oakeshott's conversation is a more open-ended affair. But it is the contention of this essay that much of what Habermas says about communicative action is applicable to the concepts of conversation and discourse.

Maeve Cooke, in her book on Habermas's theory of communicative action, writes that communicative action is a "form of social interaction in which the plans of action of various agents are coordinated through an exchange of communicative acts—that is, through a use of language...oriented toward understanding" (Cooke 1997, p. 9). Put differently, communicative action is simply the use of discourse to arrive at some kind of consensus among the conversational participants, and it is differentiated from other modes of interaction such as the use of force. Because its goal is mutual understanding and consensus, communicative action also prohibits the use of certain rhetorical strategies that Habermas labels "instrumental" or "strategic". These are strategies that assume the correctness of a particular point of view prior to entering into communication and are pursued with the intent to manipulate or coerce others into adopting that point of view instead of reaching true mutual understanding through discourse (Cooke 1997, pp. 19-22). In its proscription of force and "strategic action", it is possible to see the emergence of a moral element in this description of communicative action.

However, communicative action must contain some method for dealing with disagreement and the reality of competing and divergent opinions that does not depend on manipulation or coercion. Habermas calls this method *communicative rationality*, and it is the form of reasoning that governs instances of communicative action. Communicative rationality rests upon Habermas's insistence that all forms of communication contain within them some kind of validity claim, and therefore all communication is open to being contested by others. He identifies three types of validity claims with three corresponding methods of contestation. The first type is a claim of *propositional truth* (e.g., the earth is the center of the solar system), and it can be contested on the grounds that the claim is not true (e.g., a rejection of the evidence for a geocentric solar system). The second type of validity claim is one of *normative rightness*. This does not mean a claim about a moral norm (e.g., murder is wrong), as this would be a propositional truth claim. Rather, it is a claim that the speaker has a right to say what they said. Cooke gives the example of a teacher requesting a glass of water from a student. A student could challenge this claim by contesting the teacher's right to make that kind of request. Finally, the third type of validity claim is an *expressive* one (e.g., I am afraid). This claim can be contested by questioning the speaker's truthfulness (e.g., they do not really feel fear) (Cooke 1997, pp. 59-60, 85-86). This is admittedly a somewhat simplified version of a schema that Habermas lays out, but the point that is relative here is that *all* communication is open to possible contestation from others.

Within this context, communicative rationality at its most basic level refers to the asking for and offering of reasons to support various validity claims whenever there is disagreement. It is important to empha-

size that when Habermas refers to *reasons* and *reasoning* when discussing communicative rationality, he means this in the broadest sense of the words. He does not mean only scientific/logical/empirical reasoning, although this kind of reasoning may certainly come into play. In fact, Habermas claims that there is no way to know beforehand what kind of reasons will be compelling and acceptable to the various parties engaged in discourse. Consider again the example of a teacher asking a student to fetch them a glass of water. The student may challenge this claim on the grounds that the teacher does not have the right to make such a request. By contesting this claim, the student is asking the teacher to give them compelling reasons that they do in fact have a right to make such a request, but there is no way of knowing in advance what kind of reasons might be compelling. In fact, what is considered a compelling reason will differ according to details of the culture, tradition, etc. within which the student/teacher are operating. “Because I am your elder”, “Because I am in a position of authority”, “Because I must stay in the room to keep an eye on the rest of the class”—all of these are possible reasons that, depending on the details of the situation, will be more or less compelling to the student.

Habermas describes this situation—the impossibility of knowing in advance what reasons will be compelling—as one in which “there is no *metadiscourse* to which we can refer in order to justify a choice between different forms of argumentation. There is no forum for deciding...which kinds of argument are relevant” (Cooke 1997, p. 42). It may be possible to know what kinds of reasoning would be compelling in a *particular* situation, but the point Habermas is making is that there is no way of knowing in advance what reasons might be compelling in *all* similar situations (e.g., every time a student challenges the authority of a teacher) given that the factors that make certain reasons compelling are dependent on the particularities of a specific situation.

Oakeshott makes a similar point when he writes that when a community is confronted with a crisis, “if...there were some steady, unchanging, independent guide to which a society might resort, it would no doubt be well advised to do so. But no such guide exists; [a community has] no resources outside...its own tradition of behavior which the crisis has left untouched” (Oakeshott 1989b, p. 176). Habermas’s *metadiscourse* and Oakeshott’s “steady, unchanging, independent guide” refer to the same concept—a transcendent set of values that is applicable across all cultures and situations. Both claim that no such set of values exists, at least not one that will be compelling to all people. Instead, it is part of the process of discourse and communicative rationality—a process that always takes place within the context of background assumptions and beliefs that are part of a *particular* community—to explore and discover reasons that are convincing to the various parties involved.

After this brief sketch of Habermas’s ideas, it is possible to more clearly state the connection between these concepts and liberal education. The claim here is that if liberal education is an education in which students are asked to both study multiple modes of understanding and to put these modes in conversation with each other, it is also an education in the conversational norms that make such an enterprise possible. These conversational norms look something like Habermas’s concepts of communicative action and communicative rationality in the sense that the requesting/proffering of reasons for particular beliefs composes the main form of discourse when tensions arise between different and possibly opposing modes of understanding. However, as stated above, the particular reasons that may be compelling in a certain situation and the decisions and conclusions reached through communicative action are impossible to know in advance. In this way, the concept of communicative rationality “is not a substantive conception of reason”—i.e., it does not state what kinds of reasons or reasoning is best in a given situation. It is instead “a formally defined procedure of argumentation” (Cooke 1997, p. 38).

By aligning itself with this particular conversational procedure, liberal education rejects other methods of resolving tensions between competing beliefs such as the use of force, coercion, manipulation, or deceit. It is important to note that this rejection is founded upon a certain idea of personhood, the primary feature of which is the fundamental equality of persons. This equality underwrites the commitment of those engaged in discourse to ask for and proffer reasons in a good faith attempt to reach mutual understanding or consensus by creating a “mutual obligation” between participants in discourse. Cooke explains

this obligation, writing, “With every speech act, by virtue of the validity claim it raises, the speaker enters into an interpersonal relationship of mutual obligation with the hearer: The speaker is obliged to support her claim with reasons, if challenged, and the hearer is obliged to accept a claim unless he has good reasons not to do so” (Cooke 1997, pp. 12-13). In this connection between liberal education and equality, it is possible to see echoes of Aristotle’s claim that liberal education is the type of education that is appropriate for free people, by which he had in mind the citizens of the Athenian polis who were equals.

Additionally, discourse and conversation as it has been described in this section also make room for a popularly held goal of liberal education for some thinkers: *self-understanding*. Oakeshott himself subscribed to this view, writing that liberal education is primarily concerned with “adventures in human self-understanding”. However, he goes on to state that “Human self-understanding is...inseparable from learning to participate in what is called a ‘culture’” (Oakeshott 1989a, pp. 15-16). As this essay has shown, participation in culture is synonymous with participation in the discourse/conversation that is an essential part of culture’s constitution.

Beyond setting the parameters for how conversation should be conducted, the rules of discourse described here also support the development of a sense of self and autonomy that is critical for genuine self-understanding. They do this, not by isolating the individual, but by creating the conditions necessary for recognition of the self by others. Cooke writes, “Instead of taking as its starting point the isolated individual consciousness in its relation to an external world, Habermas’s critical theory emphasizes the social constitution of the self through the relationships of mutual recognition into which she enters on the basis of her involvement in processes of communicative action” (Cooke 1997, p. 40). Cooke goes on to explain that this process of self-constitution is not necessarily dependent on the acceptance of a person’s validity claims in an instance of communicative action because, even if their validity claims are contested and their reasons supporting their validity claims are rejected, the process teaches a person to see “himself as the accountable author of contestable validity claims, as the accountable author of his own actions, and as an individuated affective subject and responsible subject of his life history” (Cooke 1997, p. 92). In this way, then, conversation and discourse are the grounds upon which a person builds a sense of self. This is because self-understanding is constructed socially within a particular culture and tradition. Recognizing this collapses the dichotomy between what have sometimes been seen as opposing goals of education: the advancement of self-understanding and the advancement of political and cultural development.

ON CANON(S), CURRICULUM, AND THE EDIFYING PHILOSOPHER

What has been said so far has mostly addressed the theoretical foundations of liberal education. What follows in this section is an attempt to apply this theory to a question that has colored much of the contemporary discussion around Western liberal education—the place of works and thinkers who have not traditionally been included in the syllabi of classes. Too often, these discussions break down in the crucible of polarized politics, sublimating into inchoate debates about DEI, critical race theory, or other buzzwords that distract from a focus on the purpose and goals of liberal education. The hope is that what has been addressed in this essay will allow for a more productive treatment of this issue.

These debates around the content of liberal learning are often debates about expanding the canon of subjects and thinkers that have traditionally been taught in Western institutions of liberal education. However, when confronting this question, it is helpful to distinguish between three different kinds of “canon expansion”.

First, there is the process of taking an existing canonical work and opening it up to new interpretations. Judith Frank provides a good example of this in her essay *In the Waiting Room: Canons, Communities, “Political Correctness”* in which she claims that one can and should read the novel *Robinson Crusoe* as “a novel about the place in which it occurs, a novel about slavery, a novel about British colonialism” (Frank 1993, p. 137). This, she points out, is not how the novel has been traditionally taught, but her reading is based on a close textual analysis of the novel and the historical moment in which it takes place. Frank

goes on to claim, “I’m reading *Robinson Crusoe* as an artifact, an imaginative cultural act, from a culture that was talking to itself very seriously...about what it was doing in Africa and the Caribbean. My reading suggests that rather than exploiting and butchering thousands of slaves while feeling good about itself, British culture worried about it” (Frank 1993, p. 138). This kind of canon expansion is important, but it also tends to be less contentious and is not necessarily what has triggered debates about the place of the Western Canon in the liberal arts.

Much of the debate instead hinges on a second kind of canon expansion. This involves creating a place within an existing canon for new thinkers and new works that, though they have not been traditionally included in that canon, can still make a claim to belonging within it. A major source of the antagonism that characterizes debates about canons stems from the perception that there is a kind of zero-sum game going on. If one side wins, the various works that they think should be taught at universities will be included in syllabi at the expense of the works the other side is fighting for. For example, when a university gets rid of its freshman “Western Civilization” requirement because “Western Civilization was a myth concocted in the 1910s aimed at assimilating immigrant minorities and justifying American imperialism” (Bauerlein 2020) and replaces it with a “Global Citizenship” requirement, the fear is that whatever courses and content were included under the Western Civilization requirement will no longer be taught.

While it’s true that there is limited room in syllabi and curricula, and professors must choose what pieces to teach at the expense of others, the situation is not as zero-sum as it is sometimes made out to be. In fact, a possible solution to this debate lies in what has been discussed so far here in this essay: embracing the tension at the debate’s core and putting the various works for which each side is advocating in conversation with each other. For example, there used to be a class offered at the University of Chicago called *Black Political Thought: The Problem of Freedom*. In this course, students were asked to examine the question of freedom—its content, and its possibility—through the lens of slave narratives. In addition to these narratives, students also read expositions of freedom such as Hannah Arendt’s *What is Freedom?*, Isaiah Berlin’s *Two Concepts of Liberty*, and Philip Petit’s *Republicanism*. The effect of placing these various visions of freedom in conversation with each other was to show that contemporary conceptions of freedom in America cannot be understood without looking at the history of slavery and the dreams of freedom and critiques of freedom’s possibility that it engendered *as well as* the ideas of freedom passed down from Ancient Greece through England to America’s founders (sometimes these visions of freedom seemed similar, as in Fredrick Douglass’s writings, and sometimes what was presented failed to fit neatly into any common definition of freedom, such as in Olaudah Equiano’s narrative of his life). Because of this—because the Western tradition of freedom is itself a product of the tensions generated by the multiplicity of actors and historical particularities that have contributed to it—students cannot be initiated into this tradition without themselves understanding this history and these tensions. By avoiding the zero-sum thinking that too often characterizes debates about expanding the canon, this course more effectively introduced students to Western ideas about freedom than a course that only focused on one strand of this tradition at the expense of others.

If this second kind of canon expansion provokes the most debate, it is the third type that generates the most genuine difficulty. This type of expansion does not involve broadening the boundaries of an existing canon, but rather making room in the classroom for works from completely *new* canons. The saliency of this type of canon expansion in contemporary universities lies in the reality (one that is perhaps reaching a higher pitch due to increasing globalization in much of the world) of interaction between distinct traditions. Habermas, who often uses the term “lifeworld” to describe the cultural tradition within which one operates, describes this situation as one in which there are “a plurality of overlapping *lifeworlds*” (Cooke 1997, p. 16). Because of this *inter*-tradition reality, Oakeshott writes that:

...to be concerned with one’s own tradition of political activity is not enough. A political education worth the name must embrace, also, knowledge of the politics of other contemporary societies. It must do this because some at least of our political activity is related to that of other people, and not to know how they go about attending to their arrangements is not to know the course they

will pursue and not to know what resources to call upon in our own tradition (Oakeshott 1989b, p. 182).

The difficulty of this third kind of canon expansion lies not, however, in acknowledging its importance, but rather in its implementation. Oakeshott does provide some guidance here. He writes that, “The study of another’s politics, like a study of our own, should be an ecological study of a tradition of behavior, not an anatomical study of mechanical devices or the investigation of an ideology” (Ibid.). Oakeshott is claiming that, just as the study of one’s own tradition seeks immersion in the cultural conversation that is the lifeblood of that tradition, the study of another tradition should aim for a similar level of depth.

There are examples of attempts to do just this. St. John’s College offers a Master of Arts in Eastern Classics in which students immerse themselves in “the thought of India, China, and Japan while studying either Classical Chinese or Sanskrit, as studying these languages opens a window into how thought through the original language came to be” (St. John’s College Website 2025). This description, however, reveals the difficulty of such an endeavor. India, China, and Japan each represent distinct cultures, and it is difficult to imagine how a program with such breadth could also provide the depth necessary for the kind of “ecological study” that Oakeshott recommends.

If there is any hope in effectively responding to these challenges, however, it lies in the fact that “we did not begin yesterday to have relations with our neighbors” (Oakeshott 1989b, p. 182). The Western tradition has, for millennia, changed and evolved in response to its encounters with the cultures of others—from its incorporation of Christian ideas in the 4th century CE to the influence of Islamic scientific and philosophical thought in the second millennium. In modern America, there is, of course, the strong presence of Latino and Asian cultures, particularly in the West, or the influence of Dutch culture in the Northeast. Few cultures have evolved within silos, and the interstices between cultures provide entry points into a deeper study and understanding of other traditions.

For example, for a time Colorado College offered a course called *Indigenous Religions of the Southwest*. During this course students spent a week on Pine Ridge, the Lakota reservation in South Dakota, where they were introduced to and participated in various Lakota religious practices and ceremonies. That this experience fostered something deeper than a surface-level understanding of Lakota culture for the students was made possible by two factors: First, the professor of the course had long-standing connections with the Lakota community, and this fact allowed students to visit the reservation as more than mere tourists. Second, the course took place against the historical background of cultural influence between Europeans and the Lakota people. For example, many Lakota religious practices have incorporated Christian beliefs, while Lakota beliefs have been absorbed into the larger American culture in various ways. Stating it this way, of course, belies the violent history that partially underwrites the presence of Christianity in the Lakota community, and students in the course were certainly asked to grapple with this history. The point, however, is that any possibility of mutual understanding between the students and the Lakota people was predicated on and circumscribed by the history of cultural exchange between European/American Western culture and Lakota culture.

This approach to thinking about canon expansion demarcates a limit that is difficult to overcome without long-term immersion in another culture—a person can only approach the study of another tradition through the lens of their own. Fortunately, one’s own tradition is often more porous than is sometimes admitted, and the interstices between cultures, be they religious, political, or economic, offer entry points into the study of another tradition that yield more than mere cursory knowledge. Studying other traditions in this way also deepens one’s understanding of one’s own tradition, both by revealing the historical realities of mutual influence between cultures, but also by asking the student to grapple with the tensions between different traditions—a process that, like rearranging the furniture in a room, makes the old and familiar appear new. This is perhaps what Oakeshott means when he states, “to know only one’s own tradition is not to know even that” (Ibid.).

Unfortunately, there is no “metadiscourse” or “steady, unchanging guide” to which department heads and university administrators can turn when doing the difficult work of deciding what should be taught and how. What has been said here, however, does suggest a principle that should serve as lodestar when approaching question of curriculum design. It is the principle of “keeping the conversation going”. This phrase is borrowed from Richard Rorty’s discussion of “edifying philosophy” at the end of his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Rorty writes that the edifying philosopher is one who is primarily concerned with the project of:

...finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking. The attempt to edify...may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the ‘poetic’ activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by...the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions (Rorty 1979, p. 360).

This description touches on many of the ideas discussed in this essay, and it suggests that the work of the edifying philosopher is not aimed at identifying any kind of metadiscourse or objective truth. In fact, it actively resists such a project and is instead “a protest against attempts to limit conversation” by the elevation of one mode of understanding, or one conversational voice, above all others (Rorty 1979, p. 377). That Rorty’s words here echo those of Oakeshott is not mere happenstance. Rorty acknowledges his debt to Oakeshott by naming the last section of his book *Philosophy in the Conversation of Mankind* as an ode to Oakeshott’s essay *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind*. Rorty writes that he does this because Oakeshott’s essay “...catches the tone in which, I think, philosophy should be discussed” (Rorty 1979, p. 389).

Within the context of liberal learning, following the model of the edifying philosopher means that, when confronted with questions of curriculum design, what subjects to teach, or what departments to fund, universities should ask themselves if their decisions are supporting or undermining the possibility of conversation in the sense it has been described here. And a useful approach to answering this question is to ask if the conversation going on *within* the university matches that going on *beyond* the university’s campus, in the tradition and culture within which the university is situated. Recall again the course *Black Political Thought: The Problem of Freedom* described above; if there was no place for such a course in an institution of liberal learning, the institution would be failing to make space for what has been an important voice in the Western tradition for the past several hundred years—the experiences and writings of black Americans. Similarly, there must also be a place for the study of thinkers who have contributed to the concept of freedom that has been passed down from Ancient Greece because this too represents a prominent voice in the Western tradition.

Of course, the model of the edifying philosopher does not provide a clear answer in all situations, nor is it possible to make room for every voice or point of view in a university. In a living, breathing, developing tradition, it is natural that certain voices, or modes of understanding, that were once dominant are replaced by others over time. For example, grammar and philology are no longer viewed as essential subjects for students of liberal education, if they are even still taught at all. But a commitment to “keeping the conversation going” should serve as a guide for those making decisions about curriculum design. For to abandon the model of the edifying philosopher would be an admission that, when faced with task of navigating the tensions inherent in the fact of plurality, discourse and conversation are ultimately impotent.

THE PROMISE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

There is good reason to believe that liberal education and the process of discourse and conversation that it embodies is hopelessly naive. When Charles Taylor claims that the Greek notion of equality was a product of “discourse”, and that this discourse continued throughout history to shape what is intimated by the word equality today, he is surely leaving out some important parts of the story. These parts include wars, plagues, slavery, totalitarianism, and all the other instances of force and violence that represent something very different than conversation. So, while it may be true that discourse represents one method of responding to the tensions generated by plurality, it is also a historical fact that this is frequently not the method chosen, and that instead tensions often disintegrate into violence and oppression.

In light of this, liberal learning represents something more than simply an initiation into the cultural process of conversation and discourse that is ongoing. For those participating in it, liberal education signals a commitment to this process *in lieu of* other processes like violence or coercion. Liberal education, then, is the appropriate type of education for modern democracies, where communities and their inhabitants have an explicit commitment to the processes of non-violent deliberation.

The promise of liberal learning is a hopeful one because it is made in the face of a historical record that is marked by violence—where violence is, perhaps, the norm. After all, even the democracy of Aristotle’s Athens was haunted by the reality of constant war with its neighbors and the rampant inequality and slavery within its own walls. Discourse and conversation are the rare historical exception, and it is fitting, then, that Rorty calls edifying philosophy “abnormal philosophy”. But practitioners of liberal learning are committed to “keeping the conversation going” because they believe that it offers possibilities that the alternatives of violence and coercion do not.

At a personal level, conversation and discourse make possible relationships of mutual obligation and recognition that allow each person to see themselves as responsible agents whose lives have value and meaning. At a communal level, discourse allows for the non-violent creation and renewal of cultural traditions. And sometimes, discourse opens up paths towards new meanings and new understandings by provoking its participants to “fresh exertions”. It does this, not by wishing for the kind of single or final solution that those who, because of their unshakable faith in the correctness of their beliefs, long for. Instead, practitioners of liberal learning see “in their ability to sustain a conversation...human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately” (Rorty 1979, p. 378). Violence, on the other hand, by always destroying one tradition while raising up another, prevents the appearance of these new descriptions by foreclosing the discovery of a “surplus of meaning” that is possible only through discursive efforts to make tensions productive, a process through which one’s enemy is metamorphosed into one’s conversational partner.

This does not mean that individuals who have a commitment to some kind of independent standard are unwelcome in places of liberal learning, nor does it mean that students should be taught only to converse and never choose what might be right or wrong in a given situation—an effect, some decry, of contemporary education’s obsession with “critical thinking”. On the contrary, Oakeshott notes that each mode of understanding, be it science or history, has its own internal logic that allows those working within it to make claims about their object of study. And even when various voices in a conversation disagree, it is often possible to reach some kind of consensus or decision—this is the work of politics. But what students of liberal education recognize is that every moment of consensus, is just that, a moment. It is nothing more than a brief patch of calm on the “boundless and bottomless sea” upon which all communities sail. The process of navigating the sea is endless, and it requires the constant use, renewal, and reconstitution of cultural traditions and the resources they contain. Liberal education is ultimately concerned with the stewardship of this process and of preventing its foreclosure through violence and coercion. To abandon this stewardship would be an admission that conversation must ultimately make way for war, and that swords will always be the primary tool for sculpting a community.

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