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Values in the College Curriculum

Cover Page Footnote

This essay is based on a talk delivered at Sacred Heart University on February 10, 1987 as an Honors Lecture. Robert A. Preston served as President of Sacred Heart University from 1986 to 1988.

ROBERT A. PRESTON

*Values in the College Curriculum**

One indication that a word has either lost or changed its meaning is its overuse. Because words are symbolic of ideas, the overuse of certain words points generally to an increasing vagueness of the meaning of ideas, a loss of the necessary precision for the adequate communication of ideas. This has occurred in regard to such words as "love," "freedom," "rights," and "values" among others. There is no shortage in the use of these terms, but there does seem to be a correlation between the extent of their use and the loss of significant meaning. This is unfortunate because these terms refer to basic ideas and, if a society is uncertain or in basic disagreement concerning the meaning of fundamental concepts, this is a good indication of a rather serious disarray. Since intellectual anarchy precedes political anarchy, there is reason for those who are responsible for the education of the community to be concerned. If we cannot curb the confusion about ideas, we had best prepare for chaos within the political order.

Since my topic concerns values within the college curriculum, I will begin with an explanation of how I shall employ the term. Because value is a basic concept, its meaning is at once simple to understand but difficult to put into words. I will use the term "value" to refer to a quality that belongs to a thing either by reason of it being desired, or by which it is in and of itself desirable. John Dewey distinguished between what a person valued and the process of evaluation. What he was pointing out is that there is a distinction between what a person does in fact desire and what is good for him or her. Evaluation to Dewey meant the process by which we reflect on our values to determine if they will stand up to scrutiny. Are we in pursuit of the values that will bring us happiness in the long run, or have we been misled by appearances?

What needs to be resolved is the prior question as to whether today we are placing value on apparent "goods" when we should be

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seeking that which is inherently valuable. This raises the knotty issue as to whether there are things in and of themselves good regardless of whether or not they are valued. For example, in a society in which honesty was not sought for its own sake, one wherein an honest person would in fact be handicapped by his or her honesty, would this mean that honesty was no longer a value? Or would it mean that such a society had lost sight of true values and was in serious trouble? The relativist must answer that value is determined by what we do pursue; the realist must answer that there are values inherent in the nature of things and if we do not pursue these values, this is an unfortunate situation which will have a destructive result.

The question we must now raise concerns whether or not there are any values that must be sought by a society that wishes to be free. The answer to this is that there have been those who have at least thought so. One of the earliest and most notable was Socrates, who was concerned with the question of moral virtue and who found himself at odds with the relativists of his day, namely, the Sophists. Among the earlier Sophists, one of the most famous was Protagoras, who proclaimed that "man is the measure of all things." The inference here is that truth is relative and laws are merely conventional, i.e., a just law is what the majority agrees is just. The later Sophists carried the implication of Protagoras' position to its logical conclusion. Thrasymachus, who appears in the first book of Plato's *Republic*, is cited as holding the position that right and wrong are determined by the self-interest of the ruling class. Socrates opposed the position of the relativist on the grounds that it would result in the destruction of the state. He held that there is a discoverable basis for truth and justice, and it is values objectively grounded that must be the foundation of society. Socrates, although he lost the argument, was at least proved correct by the collapse of the Athenian society, one cause of which was internal moral decay. It is instructive for our purposes to listen to Thucydides, the Greek historian, who mentions a connection between the meaning of words and the downfall of Greek civilization:

Words had to change their ordinary meaning and to take that which was now given them. Reckless

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audacity came to be considered the courage of a loyal ally; prudent hesitation, specious cowardice; moderation was held to be a cloak for unmanliness . . .¹

Concerning respect for truth or the giving of one's word, Thucydides writes:

Oaths of reconciliation, being only proffered on either side to meet an immediate difficulty, only held good so long as no other weapon was at hand; but when opportunity offered, he who first ventured to seize it and to take his enemy off his guard, thought this perfidious vengeance sweeter than an open one, since, considerations of safety apart, success by treachery won him the palm of superior intelligence.²

Historically, then, we find philosophical relativism serving as corrosive agent on the social bonds that keep a political community intact. and, since the Sophists were among the earliest members of the brotherhood of teachers, we can say that teachers played an important role in the demise of the first democratic society.

Albert W. Levi, an historian of ideas, in his work *Philosophy and the Modern World*, argues that there have been two great cultural epochs in which the political state was a force for humanization. One was Periclean Athens and the other was Medieval Europe between the 10th and the 14th centuries. The dissolution of the latter is usually ascribed to the rise of nominalism in the 14th century. Basically, nominalism is the position that there is no foundation in reality for the meaning of universal ideas; such terms as "human nature" or "good" or "truth" are collective names which refer to individual things or characteristics. This says, in effect, that reality is unintelligible. Levi concludes his analysis of the historical background of contemporary society in these words:

All of Western culture is haunted by the recollection of a previous golden age, an age in which there was a common language and a community of faith. The last golden age for Western man was the period of the medieval synthesis, with a stratified but secure organization of society, the monopoly of world interpretation by a single intellectual elite, and consequently a unified picture of human life and of the human person. But with the breakdown of medieval society under the impact of science and the commercial point of view, a rigidly organized and essentially closed society becomes a loosely integrated and an open society. Corresponding to the new social pluralism, the one elite is displaced by a plurality of warring elites with a plurality of intellectual points of view. The inescapable fact about the intellectual life of the modern world is the fact of multiplicity and division.³

The British historian Christopher Dawson looks back over the same period and arrives at conclusions similar to Levi's. He points out the irony in the fact that the crisis that we now face is an intellectual one and that it is a failure that has occurred in the first society to achieve universal education.⁴

Walter Lippmann in 1938 began work on a book because he felt "impelled by the need to make more intelligible to myself the alarming failure of the Western Liberal Democracies to cope with the realities of this century."⁵ His studies led him to the conclusion that there is a body of objectively grounded principles and precepts which a good citizen cannot deny or ignore.⁶ He cites with approbation Ernest Barker's position that for the past 200 years European thought has accepted the premise that the human mind can discover a basis for law and order which produces universal validity. This guided the thought of the Stoics, was accepted by the Roman lawyers, adopted by the Christian fathers, was re-established and reworked by Thomas Aquinas, and, in a new formulation, provided the philosophy for the American Revolution of 1776. According to

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Lippmann the American experiment was founded on the basis "that a large plural society cannot be governed without recognizing that transcending its plural interests, there is a rational order with a superior common law." The current dilemma is a result of abandoning this position. Once again the relativists have replaced the realists. In Lippmann's words:

In the prevailing popular culture all philosophies are the instruments of some man's purpose, all truths are self-centered and self-regarding, and all principles are the rationalizations of some special interests. There is no public criterion of the true and the false, of the right and the wrong, beyond that which the preponderant mass of voters, consumers, readers, and listeners happen at the moment to be supposed to want.⁸

Lippmann sees the failure of the tradition of civility to hold its own against the onslaught of philosophical relativism to be a failure of educational institutions. We have not passed on the values that must be held in order to make democracy work. Lippmann concludes his study of the plight of our times in these words:

I do not contend, though I hope, that the decline of Western society will be arrested if the teachers in our schools and universities come back to the great tradition of the public philosophy. But I do contend that the decline, which is already far advanced, cannot be arrested if the prevailing philosophers oppose this restoration and revival, if they impugn rather than support the validity of an order which is superior to the values that [Jean-Paul] Sartre tells each man 'to invent.'⁹

In this bird's eye view of history I have tried to establish the following points:

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1. Free societies have traditionally been established on the premise that there are objectively knowable principles of truth and falsity, of right and wrong.
2. Such societies have endured just so long as the educational system was able to successfully pass on this tradition.
3. One cause of the downfall of any free society can be traced to the dissemination of the idea that truth is relative and that law is the expression of the self-interest of those in power.
4. The continuation or the downfall of any society is decided ultimately in the classroom.

Now if this reading of history is somewhat accurate and adequate to our purposes, it would follow that if we are not passing on in our schools the tradition that Lippmann calls the Public Philosophy we should be heading for political trouble.

Before determining whether or not we are passing on this value system, let us show that the United States was originally founded on it. In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson and his co-signers set down as the guiding principle of the new political experiment a certain set of self-evident truths, viz., that all persons are equal before the law, that they receive their rights not from the state but from the Creator, and their basic rights include those of life and liberty and the pursuit of one's personal well-being. These ideas are basic to what is called natural law theory and can be traced back from Jefferson to Locke to Hooker to Aquinas to Origen and to Aristotle and Plato.¹⁰ Here again we have a reassertion of the basic position that in a free society political life must be directed by universally valid laws which are accessible to the reason of man.¹¹

Are we passing on this tradition in a formal and systematic way? I know of no one who claims that we are. One academician who says that we are not fulfilling our educational duties to our society at the undergraduate level is William J. Bouwsman, Professor of History at Harvard University and from 1967-69 Vice Chancellor for Academic

Affairs at Berkeley. Bouwsman distinguishes between learning and education and presents the traditional view in Western society of education to be "the transmission of the deepest insights, attitudes and values of a society, the most precious legacy it can pass on to succeeding generations."¹² We are not doing this. Why aren't we? Bouwsman's answer is the professionalization of the faculty, or what Jencks and Riesman called "the Academic Revolution." Bouwsman writes:

For what the academic revolution has meant is, in effect, the triumph of learning over education, the laissez-faire pursuit of the specialized interests of learned men over the general formation of the young. Absorbed in the search for truth, we have given a minimum of attention to the coherence of the entire intellectual enterprise of the university, to problems of meaning and value, and to our deeper social role. Seeing knowledge as an end in itself, we have lost sight of the broader purpose; and professors have tended increasingly to operate on the assumption that education consisted essentially in the scholar's training his successors. In this light the university may well appear as the last stronghold of nineteenth-century liberalism, and in this respect not the most advanced but the most inert of institutions. It has operated on the vague assumption that if each scholar does his thing, all will somehow work out mysteriously for the best; through random exposure students will somehow emerge as educated men, and society should be content. This assumption has turned out to be dreadfully wrong.¹³

I have pointed to a rather serious situation which affects the continuation of our free society. If I am right, then our failure to pass on to our youth for a period of several decades the basic truths, which have traditionally stood as the foundation of the Western liberal democracies, should have serious consequences. We should find in

our society a general lack of trust between the citizens and their political leaders because once people lose the conviction that law is objective in its foundation and universal in its application they view it as representing the self-interest of those in power. Accompanying this should be a pervasive cynicism among the young who cannot find any reason to accept the voice of authority which to them speaks from a past which has no relevance in a world where all truth is relative.

As one who holds the philosophical position that Lippmann calls the Public Philosophy or to which I have referred as natural law theory, I should, about this point, recommend to you a return to this position and make a plea for all institutions of higher education to rededicate themselves to the basic principles of a free society and to make room in the college curriculum for the formal study and analysis of these principles. However, for me to advocate this would be to advocate a violation of the doctrine of academic freedom as it is presently interpreted by the American Association of University Professors.

Let me briefly review this position: it is that an institution of higher education exists for the common good and not for the furtherance of the good of the individual faculty member or of the institution as a whole. That common good involves the free search for truth and its expression by highly trained professionals who are dedicated to the search for truth. In the words of Sanford H. Kadish, past president of the AAUP:

. . . it further follows that the university and the faculty as a collectivity are debarred from identifying with particular causes or particular views of what is true or of what is right — beyond the procedural commitment to freedom — lest an orthodoxy be imposed of greater or lesser extent which subverts the special university role.¹⁴

It follows from this that institutions of higher education must remain neutral on all matters of truth or falsity and of right and wrong. The

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individual professor, however, is free to teach whatever position that his study and research have led him or her to.

This sounds very plausible and in light of all of the instances one might cite from history of the subversion of truths by both political and ecclesiastical institutions, it would seem not only justified but wise. In the case of the natural sciences, there is little danger of any researcher or group of researchers promulgating error because the methodology of science is both a public method and self-correcting. Although the methodologies of the behavioral and social sciences are not as rigid and as accurate as the natural sciences, there are still guidelines that must be followed.

In the field of philosophy, however, where one is not dealing with quantifiable data or historically ascertainable facts, the problems are much different. How is one to distinguish between sound philosophical truths that command assent from all reasonable men and the latest errant nonsense that boggles the human mind? There is no clearly identifiable criteria of mathematical exactitude or statistical probability that one can appeal to in philosophy. Nor are there canons of credibility to which the philosopher can make an appeal as does the historian. Not even the laws of logic will uncover philosophical error because logical consistency with false premises simply makes one logically correct but wrong nonetheless.

My point is that the AAUP's position of demanding *carte blanche* for the professor to teach the findings of his or her research will not have any seriously adverse effect on truth in the natural, behavioral, or the social sciences. But the situation is quite different in the field of philosophy. First of all there is no one method to which all researchers must subject their findings, and secondly, philosophy deals with matters of ultimate concern and, as I have tried to show, a free political society can endure only so long as there is basic agreement on these matters of ultimate concern.

It should be noted that the principles of a free society to which I have alluded are based upon, that is, logically entail, a definite metaphysics. If an academic institution were permitted to espouse these political principles it would, at least logically, be giving credence to the metaphysics upon which the principles are based. Therefore, to avoid this, the current doctrine of academic freedom

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requires neutrality on the part of the institution in order to avoid the imposition of any orthodoxy at all.

This then firmly fixes us on the horns of the dilemma. No free society can endure unless it can pass on to its youth the basic principles concerning the equality of men, the source of rights, and the basis of law. The current position of the AAUP forbids any institution of higher learning from requiring that these basic political doctrines be taught on the grounds that such would be a violation of academic freedom.

When I sat down to prepare this talk I fully intended to spell out for you the values that I am convinced should be taught in our colleges, present a philosophic defense of these values, and finally encourage you to work towards including them in the curriculum. As you have just heard, my reflections led me elsewhere. I do not like where they led me. Perhaps you can find flaws in my argument. I will be most grateful if you can, because it would be a case where I would be cheered up by finding out that I was simply wrong.

ENDNOTES

¹Thucydides, *History*, III, 82, cited in D.J. Sullivan, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Benzinger, 1972), p. 54.

²*Ibid.*

³Albert W. Levi, *Philosophy and the Modern World* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1959), p. 29.

⁴Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* (Garden City: Image Books, 1960), p. 12.

⁵Walter Lippmann, *The Public Philosophy* (New York: Mentor, 1955), p. 11.

⁶Lippmann, p. 79.

⁷Lippmann, pp. 81-82.

⁸Lippmann, p. 83.

⁹Lippmann, p. 136.

¹⁰Alexander Eliot claims that Jefferson made a profound study of Origen's political philosophy. See *The Horizon Concise History of Greece* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., 1972), p. 166. However, I have not been able to find any evidence that this is so.

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¹¹See J.C. Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (Garden City: Image Books, 1964), p. 8.

¹²William J. Bouwsman, "Learning and the Problems of Undergraduate Education," *American Council of Learned Societies Newsletter*, 21 (October 1970), 5.

¹³Bouwsman, p. 7.

¹⁴Sanford H. Kadish, "The Theory of the Profession and its Predicament," *The AAUP Bulletin*, 58, No. 2 (June 1972), 121.