CORE CURRICULUM, GENERAL EDUCATION AND OTHER NOSTRUMS

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What should American educators aim at accomplishing in the closing years of the twentieth century?   Everybody agrees that major changes are desirable, but the proposal that is most widely discussed and that is being pushed by Bloom, Bennett and other secular theologians of a right-wing persuasion -- to resusitate "general education," alternatively "core curriculum," alternatively again "the liberal arts" -- would make matters worse, not better. It would be seriously dysfunctional in our proletaritized, polyglot society.

There is nothing new about these proposals. Core curriculum is a concept that has been around for a long time, but none of the various core curriculums that have been laboriously worked out in the last 50 years has won general acceptance, or even survived very long in the institution that initiated it. None has reflected a consensus about what subjects, what courses, are canonical; each has rather been the product of a political struggle amongst participating departments for a share in the lucrative pool of students that the core curriculum generates -- a struggle that has little to do with educational ideals and that differs in no significant way from the bargaining and log-rolling by which Congressmen compete for shares in the Defense Department budget for their own districts. That the search for a core curriculum has not been successful is not surprising -- educators will not be able to find a core for their curriculum if the culture itself lacks a core.

Thus, pursuit of core curriculums is a blind alley. Worse, the idea of a core is nostalgic, retrospective and conservative. It refers back to the good old days in which,

the secular theologians casually assume, there was a generally accepted set of central values within which Americans lived out their daily lives. While it is certainly true that the great majority of the earliest settlers were British Protestants, even then there were deep sectarian and socio-economic differences, and the history of the United States is largely the history of increasing cultural diversification, which has greatly accelerated in recent decades. For instance, a new study of demographic trends projects that soon after the turn of the century, one third of the population will be Latino, Asian, Black, and American Indian. Is a single core curriculum -- *any* single core -- appropriate for such diversity? Is it not more likely that those who advocate one are King Canutes trying to stem an inevitable tide? In any case, the *onus probandi* lies on them to demonstrate, not to take for granted, that their recommendations would result in improvements.

Because I am going to propose that higher education set itself a radically different aim, I should start by saying that I was born into the set of values -- usually described as "Judeo-Christian" -- which the secular theologians want to restore. I, too, feel nostalgic for it -- at least in its Enlightenment version. In my youth its protective wings sheltered my early encounters with the world.

But years ago, when I began serious study of the history of Western philosophy, it became clear to me that even within this tradition there are fundamentally different world views, or "partings of the way," as I then called them -- Plato and Democritus, Stoics and Epicureans, Descartes and Hume, Comte and Nietzsche. On Plato's path answers to all the central philosophical questions -- about the nature of reality, about human nature, about knowledge, values and society -- were to be found. On Democritus' path there was a different set of answers. Travellers on the same path encountered the same objects and so had a good chance of agreeing about them. But travellers on different paths talked past one another because different objects are

encountered on different paths. The Comteans could talk to Comteans and Nietzcheans to Nietzcheans, but Comteans and Nietzcheans could only glare at one another. And what was true of Western philosophy -- anything but a single path! -- was, as I came to see, even more obviously true when one took account of other cultures as well.

In earlier times, when the various paths were more or less isolated from each other -- or when travellers on the Judeo-Christian path could look down on travellers on other paths as lesser breeds -- core curriculum and general education were not wholly implausible educational projects. But in the polyglot world of the late 20th century, where all paths inevitably interact, the premises underlying the notion of core curriculum are highly impractical. The Enlightenment system, elitist and upper class as it is, could regain its former position in American society -- if indeed, it was ever as dominant as its adherents innocently, but very conveniently, believe it to have been -- only if it came to be imposed by the state. Quite apart from the fact that any such imposition would be inconsistent with the basic tenets of this belief system, the difficulties encountered by the leaders of the Soviet Union as they have sought to impose their own belief system on the diverse peoples of Eastern Europe and Asia, should discourage those who hope that a generally applicable core curriculum is a realistic possibility, in a society like ours.

For better or worse, then, the world of the late 20th century is characterized by an immense variety of belief systems that reflect the ethnic, racial and cultural diversity of men and women whose lives are mutually involved but who do not want to assimilate. And these divisions are crossed, and so further divided, by an immense variety of highly specialized professions and technologies, each of which generates its own sub-culture. Accordingly, however much elderly people like myself may deplore the loss of status suffered by the Enlightenment world view, it is only realistic to recognize that attempts to reinstate it, or, alternatively, to substitute for it some other

claimant to "universal" status, whether Moslem, Marxist, or whatever, are dysfunctional and dangerous. In the late 20th century, live and let live is surely the only viable course.

But if the pursuit of core curriculums is a retrograde step, it does not follow that higher education should continue its present aimless drift. Higher education badly needs a unifying purpose -- the advocates of core curriculums are right about that. It's just that they are wrong about what the purpose should be. The educational system should help students adjust to the fact of human diversity, not make adjustment more difficult by teaching students to believe that the world taught them in their particular core curriculum -- it matters not whether they are Americans brought up in the Judeo-Christian belief system or Moslem Fundamentalism in Iran or Marxism in the Soviet Union -- is the one true, real world, the worlds described in other belief systems being, all of them, false appearances.

The aim of higher education should be precisely the opposite -- to help students accept diversity and learn to accomodate to it. Diversity is inevitable because the human world, unlike the world of most other animals, is a world mediated by signs. Human experience is filtered through, mediated by, what we human beings have learned and remembered, by what we manage to incorporate into concepts and words. The human world -- the only world to which we human animals have access -- is diverse and various because human beings experience the world through many different lenses, the lenses of their different cultures and their different belief systems. Everyone sees the lenses that others wear; few have any idea that they too are wearing lenses.

This lens metaphor is of course Wittgenstein's, and I am doing little more in this paper than applying Wittgenstein's insight to the problems of education in the late 20th century. For I am simply saying that the aim that should guide the organization of the

curriculum is to help every student catch at least a glimpse of his own lens. Such a shift in educational focus should have three important -- and benign -- results.

First, the graduating seniors will no longer assume, what they presumably took for granted when they entered as freshmen, that everything is itself and not another thing. They will no longer believe that the world consists of an assembly -- a very large assembly -- of facts -- facts about the past such as the fact that the American Civil War began with the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter, facts about the present such as the fact that Ronald Reagan is currently president of the United States. Nor will they any longer believe that, though some facts are doubtless complex -- the causes of the Civil War, for instance -- complex facts can all be analyzed into simple facts.

Hence their conception of what an education is will have changed and deepened. They will no longer believe that education consists in learning as many facts that are relevant to their future careers as possible and avoiding exposure to any facts that they think are irrelevant to their careers. They will now understand that being well prepared to enter law school or medical school or find well-paying jobs as computer programmers or bond salesmen is not enough. To be a good lawyer, a good physician, a good whatever, they will see it is necessary to be continuously curious about what is visible through other lenses and also ready to accept that what one sees through one's own lens will change over time -- to accept that one's education is never completed. In a word, students will realize that, because they are looking at the world through the lens of their culture, they cannot live comfortably, securely and permanently on the stock of information that they have been industriously acquiring.

Thus the first result of focussing attention on the human nature of human knowledge will be an emphasis on the complexity and incompleteness -- and hence the tentativeness -- of facts. The second result will be this: students will have learned

how to deal intelligently with uncertainty, especially cognitive uncertainty. That they learn this is important because most people deal with uncertainty badly, relying on defensive strategies. Perhaps the most widely used of these is to retreat behind the old, familiar lens, whatever it was, through which they grew up viewing the world. Since every lens assures those who wear it that it and it alone, is not a lens, this move amounts to suppressing -- unlearning -- all that they have learned about the nature of human experience and the human world. And they relapse into an attitude -- very dangerous in the polyglot world of the late 20th century -- of intolerance of difference, for they assume that all people save themselves alone are viewing the world through distorting lenses, and so comfortably conclude that those who differ from themselves are either knaves or fools.

Alternatively, instead of retreating into and reaffirming the old, familiar belief system, people may take shelter under some other belief system -- often, paradoxically, under one diametrically opposed to their earlier system, as with those ideologically committed liberals of the 30's who, by the 70's were ideologically committed right-wingers. Alternatively, again, they may simply put themselves into the hands of some individual or institution that claims cognitive authority -- the astonishing success of the fundamentalist television ministry being an example of this phenomenon.

All of these strategies are negative responses to, refusals to face, the hard truth that because human experience is a function of a variety of systems of signs, it is inevitably uncertain. They all defensively assume that uncertainty is unusual, abnormal, exceptional and hence that uncertain people are either just unlucky or else incompetent for having gotten themselves into a mess.

The first step in learning to deal effectively with uncertainty is recognizing that it follows from the nature of human experience that most problems, including all important problems, simply don't have definitive answers, in the way that jig-saw

puzzles or cross-word puzzles have correct solutions. Real-life problems -- whether they are problems in foreign policy like negotiations with the Soviet Union over the control of nuclear weapons or problems in private life like that of raising a "difficult" child -- are less problems than they are enigmas. And with respect to enigmas, "muddle through" is about the best that men and women can do. They are, after all, even the grandest of them, men and women, seeing the world through the lens of their culture, not gods seeing the world as it really is. "Muddle through" means eschewing the vain, and therefore dangerous, hope for complete answers and definitive solutions; it means doing the best one can at any given time, based upon what one has learned from earlier decisions and doing it in such a way that one has a reasonable hope of doing better, because of what one does now, at some future choice-point.

Accordingly, the second benign result of the change in aim that I recommend is that some graduating seniors -- more than in other educational systems -- will have learned not to flee from problems, but to deal with them patiently, intelligently and realistically. And the third result is that they will have discovered that for bold and courageous men and women the elusiveness of facts and the inconclusiveness of solutions are not to be deplored or accepted with weary resignation, that they are in fact opportunities to be exploited in the interest of innovation, creativity and change.

None of the lenses of culture through which people perceive the world is rigid or inflexible like the set of instincts that propel ants and termites on an endlessly repeated round of responses to stimuli. The lenses are constantly being modified, modulated, by the changes -- usually small, sometimes large -- that individuals and groups initiate because they see a somewhat better way of saying things, a somewhat better way of doing things, a somewhat better way of being the limited, far from god-like creatures that they are and that they will remain.

Most of these changes are small; it is only as they accumulate over time that they

become noticeable. A pun is an example of a small verbal innovation; it makes a tiny crack in the cake of linguistic custom. And -- this is the point I want to emphasize -- it is possible only because language is a cultural product. Things, as Sartre's Rouquentin saw, are "detached from their names"; men and women have the capacity to use old names in new ways -- to innovate linguistically. In so doing, they create -- quite literally -- new objects, new institutions -- in the world of human experience. The fact that Sartre's discovery of this freedom filled him with nausea suggests that, for all of his immense learning, he had been badly educated: he was a long time learning to accept this freedom -- to put up with it. And he never learned, I think, to positively welcome it, as an opportunity to be creative, even if the scope of one's creativity is limited, as his certainly was not, to the invention of puns.

To be creative, whether in a big way or in the small way that is the most that most people can hope for, means running risks, including not only the risk of failure but, more painful perhaps, the risk of ridicule; it demands boldness, courage, daring. Nietzsche captured this idea in a powerful metaphor, itself a fine if small example of the creative freedom of which I have been writing. "One must have chaos in oneself to give birth to a dancing star." Thus, the third, and perhaps most important result of a shift from an educational system based on ethnocentrism to one that presupposes cultural relativity can be re-phrased. The students passing through this educational system will have learned to tolerate, even to welcome, a bit of chaos in their belief systems, for the sake of having a chance to create a dancing star.

The advocates of core curriculums -- and doubtless others as well -- will challenge the relativistic premise from which I start. Although elsewhere I -- and others, of course -- have argued the case for relativism in detail, in these pages I have had to state it baldly, confining myself to pointing out that the relativist thesis, so far from being intrinsically absurd, is much more compatible with the empirical evidence of

diversity than is the ethnocentrism of the supporters of core curriculums. Hence I hope that at least some educators will suspend judgment and be willing to adopt it as a tentative, working hypothesis -- which is the most any relativist can consistently claim for any thesis -- and test the proposition that a curriculum based on the relativistic premise would produce more graduates who are intellectually and morally mature than would a curriculum based on a core curriculum.

After all, the notion that students can acquire the attitudes that are appropriate for inhabitants of this late 20th century world is not Utopian. Clearly, some students now passing through the American system of higher education do learn to accept, and even enjoy, diversity and uncertainty. But such learning as does occur is now only the result of the happy coincidence of individual students and individual teachers, not of planning by the institutions themselves.

For at present educational institutions are structured, whether intentionally or not, in ways that inhibit this kind of learning. Courses, lectures, syllabi, and textbooks all tend to protect students from exposure to diversity of opinion. So far as they learn anything at all, they learn to see the world through the lenses, whatever they happen to be, of their teachers. This naturally flatters the egos of teachers, which is one of the chief reasons why the system persists, but it deprives students of an essential component in their education -- discovery of the contextual nature of human knowledge. No wonder, then, that few students ever come to understand the nature of, and the limitations on, our human contact with the world.

Given the sterile and bureaucratic nature of the educational system there is little chance of the whole system suddenly reforming itself along the lines suggested here -- to hope for that would be Utopian indeed! But over time change is possible. Very great changes have occurred in the past -- the introduction of the elective system, for instance -- because some educators had the courage to try something new and because

the less courageous saw that the new system, being responsive to a real cultural need, worked better than the old.

Here and there in the interstices of the educational system, as I have already said, there are teachers who understand how the lens of culture affects the human condition and who want their students to understand this and also to understand its implications for their lives and their traffic with nature and with other men and women.

How, it may be asked, can this understanding be communicated? The answer is that any concentration, or major, will do, providing only that the subject be sufficiently "thick" -- sociology, for instance, but not shorthand; physiology, not physical education -- for a variety of approaches have emerged. What matters is much less what the major is than how it is taught. And there is no single way of teaching that is the right way; the ways are as many and diverse as the culture itself. Nevertheless, since an example may be helpful, I will give one and I will draw it from the teaching I know best -- my own.

When I was teaching the history of philosophy, for instance, I always chose texts that I was confident Caltech students would find not only difficult but "weird," *The Republic* for instance, and at the other end of the scale, *Zarathustra*. And in class discussions I concentrated on passages that seemed to them to be utter nonsense. "Don't," I used to say, "write off Plato (or Nietzsche, as the case might be) as boobs; they were at least as bright as you are. What they say sounds nonsense to you because they started from assumptions that are fundamentally different from yours. Read the text to find out what their assumptions were, and then think about the assumptions that must be hidden in what is obvious to you, because what is obvious to you would be nonsense to them."

Thus it isn't necessary to design a new sort of course, but only to teach any standard course from a different perspective, focussing attention not so much on the

text as on (to use a currently fashionable term) the subtext. There is of course nothing original about this approach; many teachers use it. But their teaching, because it occurs in the interstices of a system that is set in a different mold, affects only their own students.

What is necessary is only a few risk-accepting educational administrators, as risk-accepting as Eliot of Harvard and Aydelotte of Swarthmore were in their times, which of course were different times, who see the relation between the kind of teaching I have just described and the kind of education needed in this pluralistic, culturally diverse society. Such educators will cease to reward their faculties for spending their time reorganizing the curriculum or for quarelling over which books are Great Books and which ideas are Great Ideas, and over which disciplines are liberal and which are beyond the pale. Instead, they will encourage them to concentrate on that great liberating art by means of which students learn an attitude of tolerance -- of ironic distance -- toward the manifold and diverse beliefs of others and, what is even more difficult, toward their own beliefs as well.