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HOW CAN VALUES BE TAUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY?

TONI MORRISON, SPRING 2001

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It is the right question and I think appropriately the first one, glancing away, as it does, from an associated, perhaps even precursor one: *whether* universities should teach values. The “whether” ripples through late twentieth-century debates in several forms. Certain disciplines pride themselves on the value-free nature of their intellectual inquiries, and the pursuit of “objectivity” is at the heart of their claims, claims which are understood to place the stature of these disciplines far above interpretive ones.

Nevertheless, explicitly or implicitly, the university has always taught (by which I mean examined, evaluated, posited, reinforced) values, and I should think will always follow or circle the track of its origins. When higher education leapt or strutted out of the doors of the church (whether by license from the crown, permission of the diocese, or charters from guilds), it was extricating itself from the church’s charge, where monastic schools and libraries were centers of learning and most students were expected to take (and did take) orders—ecclesiastical orders, that is—but it did not slam the cathedral doors or the Calvinist parish gates behind itself. The faculty-cum-clergy carried their religious principles and preoccupations with them. Like other institutions of higher learning, Princeton was founded by a collection of laymen and clergy who, because of a dispute concerning religious belief and the dissemination of those beliefs to its student body, exited a college founded by other clergy and laymen. The founding of the university was never understood to be a severance from ecclesiastical scholarship, but rather a segue into the more exciting and demanding realm of the conjunction of faith and reason—applying reason to faith, faith to the

worldly, and abjuring the shadow of scholasticism which tainted both. The history of moral philosophy and its transformation into humanistic studies can be seen as an argument with and among definitions of reason, its status in spiritual life, and its impact not on faith, but on moral orientation.

The genesis of higher education is unabashedly theological and conscientiously value-ridden and value-seeking. There is not much point in and certainly not much time for rehearsing the evolution of the university to its present state of arrest over questions of value and ethics. We can simply note that the academy has, for the most part, shed its theological coat, relegated those high purposes to departments, schools of religion, and seminaries, and wrapped itself instead in a moral cape made of panels of cloth woven in enlightened and pre-enlightenment theses: that knowledge is a good; that the rightly trained mind would turn toward virtue; that the commitment of higher education was to train leaders to envision, if not effect, a desirable future.

The university's re-invention of itself and its mission responded to major historical upheavals: wars, transformations in economy, new populations, etc., and as newer, better, and more likely provable knowledge accumulated in the sciences, the shift in the goals of universities was dramatic and may have led some to think that the secular education offered by the academy strives only for value-free, objective, pure research, analysis and exposition. Yet today, biological and medical sciences are being perpetually transformed by the ethical consequences of their own innovations. Education in the law is similarly scoured by its own practitioners employing new technologies to concepts of justice. All kinds of disciplines are responding to modern ethical issues with the same ferocity as their predecessors, ancient, medieval, or colonial. Although no one would suggest that corporate and commercial interests in the universities are innocent and not vested, it is strongly asserted that those interests serve in some way "the public good." Thus the real or imagined search for "goodness" in some figuration is still part of the justifying, legitimizing language of the academy.

It is in that context that the question is put: how to teach values? Several initiatives are already in place at many universities (certainly at Princeton) which constitute a kind of secular pulpit: the encouragement of voluntarism, an announced high regard and reward for students engaged in public service work; policy measures instituted by administrators to protect and

defend their populations from harassment and assaults on their liberty and safety; careful and mediated responses to civil rights legislation; regular voluntary examinations of itself for inequities of representation; the creation of institutes and centers funded for precisely the airing and pursuit of ethical questions and allied problems of inculcating value (not least of which is the sponsor of this conference—the University Center for Human Values). These efforts (often bitterly contested) can impress upon the student body the seriousness in which the university holds these matters—a seriousness which stresses and clarifies the university's definition of a complete and sophisticated education. But institutional directives can become formulaic, a menu of phrases, courses, and temporary forms of behavior that a student can taste without swallowing. Or, more cynically, they work as “fictions,” folk costumes which the site of learning wears to cover the nakedness of mandarin, exclusionary domination.

Yet as assaults on and demands for school prayer, religious symbols on school property, and control of course curricula become legal cases making their way through courts, frequently invoking the separation of state and church, that legal journey both skirts and displays another question: not whether or how, but which. Which values, in act or symbol, should a public institution of learning reject, endorse, or tolerate? To insist that it endorse none, that it remain neutral, non-judgmental, and tolerant of religions, religiosity, and atheists alike, requires a sensitivity and alertness so intense it can descend to the absurd when not merely distracting. Why should schools close on religious holidays? Why should they be called *holy* as in holy days? Why permit houses of worship to participate in school and academic functions? I am merely suggesting how porous the “separation” of church and state is, how irrevocably entangled are our lives, our practices, and our language in passionately held views of what the good, the ethical, the moral mean or should mean; how passionate the clash of reason and faith; of genetics and environment. These are the Great Debates of the twenty-first century as the struggle to improve the world goes on. This is familiar ground upon which humanistic inquiry treads. Recent inquiries have considered whether our or any notion of secular morality is “universal.” Whether whole bodies of knowledge are secret agendas of oppression. Whether “evil” is simply another aesthetic; whether violence has its own “beauty” in art, in cultural practice, in politics.

I have no original ideas in this matter or on this score. The torturous route the academy has taken to shake off scholasticism and embrace humanism is its own best evidence of the magnitude of the question. I tend to think, however, that in the course of teaching, the material I ask students to read, the dialogue that ensues following those readings, and the threads of argument I nudge students to explore, make up one part of how I communicate value. But it may not be the most important part. I know, as you do, from having been a student and from observing faculty as well as being a member of many faculties, that the values one personally holds seep through. Through everything I say, write, and do, however I may try to stand between, to the side, or over issues of ethics and value when discussion is underway, my position is either known or available to be known. If I encourage strictly and only aesthetic readings of literature, then I have left an indelible message of where I place the persuasive, historical aspects of literature. If I insist upon solely political understandings of these readings, that too is a teaching of value. If I am content with or indifferent to the purification rites of the justice and legal system in the way it handles its young, its minorities, that is a powerful value judgment not hidden although it may be unspoken. Is my critique fruitful or merely elaborate name-calling or put-down?

What I think and do is already inscribed on my teaching, my work. And so should it be. We teach values by having them. Whether or not we drive or seduce or persuade others to share them, whether or not we are indifferent to or accommodating to the ethics of others, whether we are amused by the concept of value being teachable, whether we are open to being argued into supporting values contrary to those we have held—all of these possibilities and strategies matter. The innate feature of the university is that not only does it examine, it also produces power-laden and value-ridden discourse. Much scholarship is often, even habitually, entangled in or regulated by ideology. Since, as humanists we know that that is the case, acknowledgment is preferable to the mask of disinterest. In any case, it becomes incumbent upon us as citizen/scholars in the university to accept the consequences of our own value-redolent roles. Like it or not, we are paradigms of our own values, advertisements of our own ethics—especially noticeable when we presume to foster ethics-free, value-lite education. Now the question of how to teach values becomes less fraught. How do we treat each other?

The members of our own profession? How do we respond to professional and political cunning, to raw and ruthless ambition, to the plight of those outside our walls? What are we personally willing to sacrifice, give up for the "public good"? What gestures of reparation are we personally willing to make? What risky, unfashionable research are we willing to undertake?

The evolution (or devolution, depending upon one's point of view) of the university into an internet of higher education, with texts and their explications data-based, with interrogations routinized, with experts taking the place of professors, is not to be confined to fantasy. Ideas for just such expansion are already in practice, and its worth to third world, rural, and under-served communities is hard to gainsay. But a massive conversion to a "www.com" university may not be our complete or immediate future only because the human desire to congregate is paramount. But another reason for the survival of more traditional campuses (with living, fleshed, as opposed to virtual persons interacting with students, contributing to something called "student life" and the benefits thereof) is that survival may depend on the move from the profession of humanistic intellectual to the vocation of humanistic intellectual, regardless of the dangers of demagoguery. If the critical platform remains open, the charlatans will be exposed.

Post-Reagan business centers have turned much academic and public discourse back to nineteenth-century liberalism. To counter the deleterious effects of that combination of nostalgia and hypocrisy, the university need not return to its pre-medieval, medieval, or colonial sources to re-ignite wider and more variable notions of virtue, civitas, response-ability and freedom. It can speculate instead on a future where the poor are not yet, not quite, all dead; where the under-represented minorities are not quite all imprisoned. In that recipe for American pie in which a society made up of an increasingly toughened crust of the rich continues to rest upon and contain the seething, smarting poor, then strategizing and updating the means by which values are taught becomes critical. If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or ménage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, and without us.

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