

**Liberal Learning, Chicago Style: Reflections on a Founding Tradition in Liberal  
Arts Education  
Phillip R. Sloan  
Program of Liberal Studies  
University of Notre Dame**

The theme of this year's conference, "Substance, Judgment, and Evaluation: Seeking the Worth of a Liberal Arts, Core Text Education," and its location in the city of Chicago, has suggested some reflections on the importance of the intellectual world of this city for the development of some of the ideals of core text education as it is represented by the diversity of programs and approaches at this conference. Chicago has played an important, even crucial, role in the history of core curricular programs, those representing the "great books" movement in education. The establishment of the University of Chicago College curriculum, known as the "New Plan," in the 1930s during the presidency of Robert Maynard Hutchins, gave a prominent institutional expression to the ideals of education centered around a curriculum based upon the reading and discussion of a canon of classic texts. It was, when proposed in the early 1930s, an overt challenge to the reigning emphasis on scientific education and John Dewey's educational pragmatism. It forced into the open a major curricular battle over what was a university education, and particularly a liberal education, and it made the idea of reading a canon of books something that for a time became part of a middle-brow education.

Hutchin's program, like most programs in the United States that emphasize some required curriculum based on the reading of core texts, can be traced in its origins to the General Honors program at the Columbia University. But Chicago made this into a movement that extended widely and deeply into American culture. As a child of the 1950s, I recall the weekly column in my home-town newspaper by Mortimer Adler, in which if one had a question used by him in his column, the reward was a set of the *Britannica Great Books*. I never won such a set, nor even submitted a question, but it suggested something about a period of time after the catastrophe of World War II when there was some general concern to find something enduring in our heritage. Certainly inspired by Adler's leadership, The Great Books movement spread to local libraries, adult discussion groups, and even to elementary schools.<sup>1</sup>

But the more academic manifestation of this development in the Hutchins curriculum became one of the primary inspirations for the New Curriculum established by Stringfellow Barr and Scott Buchanan at St. Johns College in Annapolis in 1937.<sup>2</sup> Hutchin's ideals spread to many other contexts. In the post-World War II period, it was influential on the establishment of my own

---

<sup>1</sup> Some further elaboration of this general history is in Mortimer Adler's autobiography, *Philosopher at Large: an Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> See J. Winfree Smith's history of the St. John's Curriculum, *A Search for the Liberal College: the Beginning of the St. John's Curriculum* (Annapolis: St. Johns College Press, 1983).

Program of Liberal Studies at Notre Dame in 1950, begun as the General Program of Liberal Education.<sup>3</sup> It also extended internationally, with the Hutchins curriculum serving as an inspiration for the founding of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, Colombia in 1949, the first non-sectarian private university in that country.

It is not my purpose to recount the history of the Hutchins curriculum or the great books movement, the fights that surrounded its origins, or the deficiencies as well as the strengths one might now perceive in these ideals of education. As Sheldon Rothblatt argued last evening, the possibility of finding a single canonical core of readings on which the members of ACTC could agree upon, let alone agreement achieved between a wider set of institutions in the United States, suggests that some of the original ideals of the great books movement in its concern with definitive lists is not itself a necessary goal. We represent here many different versions of core text programs besides those devoted to the great books. But I think it is safe to say that without the creative educational leadership in the middle decades of the last century by such individuals as Hutchins, Adler, Richard McKeon and others associated with the University of Chicago, we would not be meeting here today.

---

<sup>3</sup> A history of the first fifty years of the Program of Liberal Studies is available at: <http://pls.nd.edu/about/history/>. For autobiographical reflections on the origins of this

As I commented in my Presidential address last year, the challenge we face in this new century demands that we now must think in international terms, and we are responsible to more than the canon of western classics. But the engagement with texts to which we can return again and again, that bear continuous reading, reflection and discussion, from whatever tradition they may arise, is something that I think can unite us as an association and that I sense still resonates with the pedagogical and intellectual ideals of the Chicago reforms. These still have some relevance for the expanded vision we are seeking to develop through ACTC.

In his call for a reform of liberal education, *Higher Education in America* of 1936, that originated as his Storrs lectures at Yale in 1935, Robert Hutchins drew upon an important treatise in the history of liberal education, written in 1845 by the omniscient master of Trinity College, Cambridge, the Rev. William Whewell (1794-1866). For my subsequent development of theme, I shall draw upon Whewell's treatise in several places.

Whewell was one of the great public intellectuals of Victorian England—mineralogist, mathematician, philologist, historian and philosopher of science, one of the mentors of Darwin, a contemporary of Lyell, Sedgwick and Newman. When Whewell spoke, others listened. He still holds the status as the greatest

---

program by its founder, Otto Bird, see his *Seeking a Center: My Life as a "Great Bookie,"*

historian of science of the nineteenth century, and his impact on the philosophy of science has been deeply felt in the twentieth century.

His treatise, entitled “Of a Liberal Education in General,” was issued in the midst of the great middle decades curricular battles that took place in England a century before Hutchins own struggles. These pitted the traditional Oxbridge residential college model, devoted to the study of the classics and the tutorial method of instruction, against the new utilitarian university of University College London, founded by the disciples of Jeremy Bentham, whose mummified body still sits surveying his progeny in the main foyer of the university, and the continental alternatives supplied by French and German education.<sup>4</sup>

In his treatise, Whewell was specifically concerned with the mode of teaching of mathematics. The challenge was from the Continent, and from the analytic formulations of the calculus, which threatened to supplant the demonstrative geometry still required in the Cambridge tripos, grounded on Euclid and Newton’s *Fluxions*. But as an introduction to this discussion, Whewell offered a set of reflections on the nature of liberal education, and in this he made an important distinction between what he termed “permanent”

---

(San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991).

studies and “progressive” studies, with permanent studies found on the study “of ancient languages and their literature, [and] long established demonstrative sciences,” whereas the “progressive” studies concentrated on the “mental activity of our own times: the literature of our own age, and the sciences in which men are making progress from day to day.”<sup>5</sup>

I consider this distinction to be a useful one for discussing contemporary liberal education. It recognizes the dual requirement, and the dual pressures, I am sure many of us feel, in our educational environments. On one hand, we are charged with equipping our students with some kind of education that will enable them to function in our complex technical and economic society with expertise. Legislatures, parents, businesses, professional schools all pressure us in this direction, and perhaps with some merit. We do need research scholars, highly trained professionals, and specialized experts in our world. Our problems are immense, and to solve them requires specific and detailed knowledge.

But as those committed to a genuine liberal arts education, we recognize the need for a “permanent” liberal education that prepares students for the full

---

<sup>4</sup> For an important study of these conflicts see Michael J. Keating, “The Battle for Oxford: a Study of Educational Ideals,” (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame Department of History, 1998).

range of life's challenges. Kant's four great questions from his *Lectures on Logic*—What can I know? What ought I to do? For what may I hope? What is a human being?—remain ever with us and with our students, and these are questions technical expertise cannot resolve. As Whewell discerned with great prescience, our “progressive” studies were best pursued when built upon a foundation in his “permanent” studies.<sup>6</sup>

Whewell's distinction between the two forms of education provides a useful vocabulary for distinguishing the kind of education sought in programs of education that in some form—whether in required core courses, special tracks, or full four-year curricula-- are devoted to reading the core texts of our many traditions—I do emphasize the plural here--and the more specialized disciplinary education in immediate practical subjects and disciplines sought in traditional majors. Specifying the content of that “permanent” heritage is, of course, where the disagreements inevitably begin. The pointed challenge of Gertrude Stein to Robert Maynard Hutchins after he and Mortimer Adler returned from one of their great books seminars— “What *are* the great books?,”<sup>7</sup> meaning “who is to decide,”— is a query one often hears from colleagues, and we must admit that the contingencies that have surrounded the

---

<sup>5</sup> William Whewell, *Of a Liberal Education in General; and with Particular Reference to the Leading Studies of the University of Cambridge* (London: Parker, 1845), pp. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Hutchins, *Higher Learning*, p. 75-76.

definitions of the reading lists of various great books and core text programs, including my own, suggest that these are not easy questions to answer without some reflection. The growing diversity of voices represented by ACTC suggests that we would also have to define this with attention to our international scope and to the diversity of our constituency. In deciding the character of this “permanent” heritage, we must admit these complexities. The selection of the texts we choose to read is a historically contingent one. As the fate of Shakespeare, Bach and Kierkegaard illustrate, it may take considerable time, and even major intellectual revolutions, before some authors are recognized as worthy of continued re-examination and discussion. Think of authors who might have been all the rage at certain moments in the nineteenth century, but who are now typically of interest only to cultural historians and whose works never appear on any core reading list that I know of—Walter Scott, Samuel Taylor Coleridge—at least as a philosopher—Herbert Spencer, Ernst Haeckel, Harriet Martineau, Henry Thomas Buckle, August Comte. Will our twentieth-century pantheon necessarily fare any better by the end of this century? Will Mann be included? Will Sartre, G. E. Moore, Virginia Woolf, Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, Saul Bellow, Michel Foucault, Ralph

---

<sup>7</sup> Adler, *Philosopher at Large*, p. 139.

Ellison, Claude Levi-Strauss, or Toni Morrison? I suspect that it is too early to decide any of this.

Perhaps the best that we can answer to Gertrude Stein's question is that we read *some* of the major tradition-defining texts, and that we typically try to read those which have been sifted out by a discussion over a period of time as being important for our own thinking and for the discussion taking place within our contemporary world. Hopefully we also read them with passion for what they say. This might be the greatest difference separating an approach to the core texts which is only concerned with them as historical artifacts, and one that engages them existentially as having something to say to us today—the difference between an “intellectual history of culture” and a great conversation. We must engage them from our own historical situated-ness, and we enter this dialogue with the constant recognition that we carry along with us our own autobiographies and our own unique formative historical experience. The hermeneutic dialogue with the past is a complex one. But it is also a vital one, at least I would hope it would be so.

This concern with content—with some attempt to fill in that “permanent” education—is the domain where ACTC, in all the manifestations of curricula it represents, seems to be unique in its goals as a professional educational organization. We are concerned with more than form. Let me elaborate on this

point by putting forward for consideration the definition of liberal education offered by the American Association of Colleges and Universities:

Liberal education has been a philosophy of education that aims to empower individuals, liberate the mind from ignorance, and cultivate social responsibility. Characterized by challenging encounters with important issues, a liberal education prepares graduates both for socially valued work and for civic leadership in their society. It usually includes a general education curriculum that provides broad exposure to multiple disciplines and ways of knowing, along with more in-depth study in at least one area of concentration.

By its nature, liberal education is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity in all its forms is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility. For nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives.<sup>8</sup>

There are several themes in this definition that seem important to tease out. I highlight the terms “empowerment,” “liberation of the mind,” “broad exposure to multiple disciplines and ways of knowing,” “diversity.” Only lacking is the common reference in many such program statements to the development of “critical thinking skills.” The various programs that ACTC encompasses may indeed agree on these general sentiments expressed in the AAC&U statement, but it is likely each of our member programs seeks, then, to give content to these open categories in different ways. This diversity is what gives our meetings the unique character that they have. We know there are more than western texts; we recognize that there are many voices to be heard in this conversation.

---

<sup>8</sup> Association of American Colleges and Universities, [www.aacu.org/pres-room.media-kit/what\\_is\\_liberal\\_education.cfm](http://www.aacu.org/pres-room.media-kit/what_is_liberal_education.cfm). Accessed May 16, 2005. Entire statement.

The Hutchin's plan of the 1930s was one attempt to give a specific content to an ideal of liberal education that combined the *artes liberales* of the classical humanistic educators with a systematic philosophical ordering of knowledge that owed its main inspiration to Hutchin's interpretation of the university curriculum of the high middle ages. It meant for Hutchins a hierarchy of disciplines, with philosophy and theology taking a primary place, and with a substantive metaphysics as the organizing framework.

As those familiar with the history of the Chicago controversy during the early years of Hutchin's presidency know, his curricular project was considered by its critics as reactionary, medieval, and authoritarian. Reading over Hutchins' *Higher Education* certainly emphasizes issues that would be anathema to much of higher education today—the need for education based on first principles, the call for some kind of deeper metaphysical inquiry that would seek to “establish rational order in the modern world as well as in the universities,” and so on.<sup>9</sup>

The rebuttal to Hutchins's treatise, issued a year later by Harry Gideonse of the University of Chicago's economics department, *Higher Learning in a Democracy*, makes many of points that one would expect to hear with greater vehemence in today's academic battles—the claims of faculty autonomy, the absence of criteria by which to judge an appropriate metaphysics, the need for research and specialization, the fear of authoritarianism and collectivism in

---

<sup>9</sup> R. M. Hutchins, *Higher Learning in America*, new ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 105.

education, the importance of a scientific model of education as the heart of the modern achievement in learning.<sup>10</sup>

But admitting the force of some of Gideonse's critique of aspects of the Hutchins's vision, there still seems to my reading something of worth in the idea Hutchins borrowed from Whewell about the value in the contemporary world of an education concerned with "permanent" learning. Our concern in both our meetings and in our own curricula is to engage in a search for some understanding of this permanent heritage, while at the same time we seek ways to engage the contemporary world. What difference will such a bifocal education make to our students as they move into professions and practical work? or into academics and research careers? What difference can it make to us as we may attempt to engage very immediate questions in our own scholarship and writing?

## II

Let me address this issue by offering some specific focus to my discussion in the second part of this address. I will pursue this through a brief excursion into some of the most divisive issues in our contemporary socio-political world. These are issues that simple clear thinking, rhetorical skills, or even great technical expertise alone are not sufficient to address. I am specifically concerned with hot button issues surrounding the uses of medical knowledge and biotechnology—genetic engineering, IVF reproduction, stem cell research, end of life questions. These are profound issues that directly follow from the great developments of scientific medicine and its related disciplines as these have developed since the middle of the nineteenth century, expanded in

---

<sup>10</sup> H. D. Gideonse, *Higher Learning in a Democracy: A Reply to President Hutchins' Critique of the American University* (New York: Farrer & Rinehart, 1937).

the twentieth century by computerization, plastics manufacture, engineering, biophysics, molecular genetics, and nanotechnology. These developments have given us immense power over almost all aspects of life, such that death itself is seen by some as a disease to be conquered. We can finally bring to realization the Cartesian dream of a completion of the “mastery and possession of nature.” We now seem to have within our grasp what at least for Descartes was the highest good— maintaining health and prolonging life.<sup>11</sup>

I need not detail the conflicts that this mastery over life is producing, and will continue to produce, in the social body in the coming decades. We seem at times to be caught in insoluble conflicts that divide the scientific community from large portions of the citizenry. These issues divide us politically. How can an education that seeks some grounding on a permanent fund of learning assist us in negotiating such difficulties?

I will answer this question in an unusual way by pointing to the working methods of the President’s Council on Bioethics, directed until recently by University of Chicago Adding Clark Harding professor of Humanities, Leon Kass. This committee has been attacked from many sides of the political spectrum. It includes Republicans and Democrats, theologians and research scientists of the Nobel-Prize, National Academy of Sciences level, physicians and lawyers, Christians, Jews, and secular humanists. It is also important for its name: a Council *on* bioethics, rather than *for* or *of* “professional” bioethicists.

What initially surprised everyone with the original meetings of this Council was the way in which it began its deliberations. Instead of immediately starting in on practical problems, it commenced with a seminar on

---

<sup>11</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, VI, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoof and Murdoch in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. Cottingham et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge U Press, 1985), I, 143,

a primary text with which many here may be familiar. If not, I highly recommend that you read it. It formed one of the texts used in our ACTC “Bridging the Gap” Seminar last summer that was directed to the problem of technology.

The text is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Birthmark,” a literary gem that raises many probing questions about the drive of scientific reason to eliminate defectiveness. What this, and other preparatory meetings of the Council were intended to do, was to move beyond an effort to achieve consensus or resolve deep differences among the diverse group of panelists. The intent was rather to deepen the level of discussion to a level that bioethical analysis rarely extends. This was being pursued by factoring into the discussions a body of literature and philosophy from a longer tradition that typically would have no place in a committee devoted to bioethics. A sample of the kind of readings the Council engaged can be seen in the collection of readings it has subsequently prepared under the title, *Being Human*. This collection can be obtained free on-line from the Council website:<sup>12</sup> it includes selections from Plutarch, Tolstoy, Willa Cather, Jonathan Swift, Solzynitzyn, Emily Dickinson, and the Hippocratic Oath. Another text, *Beyond Therapy*, raises a host of reflective questions about the limits of technology, the difference between “therapy” and “enhancement,” and examines the dream of medical perfectionism.

Such readings and reflections cannot, and have not, resolved the practical questions, and for this reason these excursions into literature and philosophy have been ridiculed. Such reading could not generate consensus on such difficult issues as embryonic stem cell research. Judging from the individual statements that often accompany the major Council documents, there remain

deep and fundamental divisions among the members. But such discussions press the reflection and discussion of difficult questions to levels that are rarely pursued in our contemporary bioethical debates. What is it to be human? What is the best use of this powerful technology we now have at our disposal? When does medicine cease to be a curative profession and enter the domain of utopian improvement? How can reflection on our great heritage of literature, philosophy, and our religious and ethical traditions assist us in answering these questions? How might this reading and discussion of core texts assist us in thinking through the new possibilities raised by our biotechnology so that we might avoid creating from our good intentions the flat, banal world described in Aldous Huxley's famous dystopian novel?

I should be clear that I have not used the example of the President's Council to endorse a set of positions on the urgent biotechnological questions we are facing at the moment. It has been easy to politicize the deliberations of this Council in unfortunate and uncomprehending ways in the media. But this is to misunderstand what I see as the deeper importance of this kind of high-level reflection stimulated by the reading of our permanent heritage of reflection on life's great questions. What I see the Council as having supplied is an example of a way of proceeding in the discussion of divisive issues where a genuine dialogue between the past and the present becomes a means of gaining some traction on these questions. Otherwise we are trapped by history into endlessly-competing moral positions that, as Alasdair MacIntyre has described the opening of his *After Virtue*, represent only surviving fragments of discourse whose foundations have been forgotten. Education in our admittedly fluid and historically conditioned "permanent" heritage, enables us to recover that forgotten dialogue. We can discern more clearly by

---

<sup>12</sup> Available at [www.bioethics.gov](http://www.bioethics.gov).

such reading what are the first principles of our arguments, and why people might hold to competing premises for good reasons. We are mutually challenged to think about these questions with that richer set of dialogue partners.

So to the question that emerges from the subtitle of this conference, “what is the worth of a liberal arts, core text education?” I suggest that the answer lies in the unusual ability of such an education to deepen the level of our discussion of great questions that face us today. In conversation with some “permanent” heritage, however we define it, we must formulate our own reflections in a dialectical interchange of competing voices and perspectives. To negotiate this cacophony of voices, even within the western tradition, requires itself the development of a kind of “artful” learning that goes beyond the usual list of advantages cited in favor of a liberal education—the ability to write, to analyze, to speak effectively. An education based at some point on core texts requires all of these great skills, but it goes further. It supplies a means to moderate and critique our “progressive” knowledge with perspectives drawn from those who have considered these issues before us.

I wish to close with a comment from Leon Kass, who in addition to a concern with the issues of bioethics and its relation to the human, has also reflected on the reason for seeking a grounding in our “permanent” learning:

Finally, liberalism means liberal education. Not just education for employment or even for citizenship, important though these are, but education for thoughtfulness and understanding, in search of genuine wisdom. Full human dignity requires a mind uncontaminated by ideologies and prejudice, turned loose from the shadows of the cave, free not only to solve factitious problems of its own devising, but free to think deeply about the meaning of human existence and especially in a world overshadowed by technology, to think about the nature and purpose and goodness of science and technology. If the deepest problem of technology lies in the

narrowly utilitarian habit of mind it engenders, liberal education offers an antidote.<sup>13</sup>

I wish you all success and invigoration in the deliberations of this meeting.

---

<sup>13</sup> Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity : the Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2002), p. 52.