Morality and the Liberal Arts: Six Axes of Connection

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Abstract: The universe of liberal education is a moral one because it involves communities, and therefore the potential for competition and conflict. However, the ways in which morality and the liberal arts intersect are complex, problematic, and contested. This essay explores six axes along which liberal education is animated by moral concerns: the axis of policy; that of language and communication; within the curriculum (particularly, but not exclusively, in the humanities); in pedagogy; in terms of moral agency and character; and finally, in terms of the mission of liberal education. Mapping these six dimensions doesn't resolve fundamental moral problems, but offers a framework for understanding them more clearly and for managing those "essentially contestable" debates that cannot be resolved.

Résumé: L'éducation libérale est dirigée par une certaine morale parce qu'elle implique les communautés, et donc, le potentiel de concurrence et de conflit. Cependant, les façons dont la morale et les arts libéraux se croisent sont complexes, problématiques et contestées. Cet article explore six axes selon lesquels l'éducation libérale est animée par des préoccupations morales. Nous examinerons l'axe de la politique, de la langue et de la communication, des programme d'études (en particulier, mais pas exclusivement, en sciences humaines); de la pédagogie; de la liberté morale et de caractère; et enfin, de la mission de l'éducation libérale. Établir une cartographie de ces six dimensions ne résout pas les problèmes moraux fondamentaux, mais offre un cadre pour mieux les comprendre et pour gérer les débats « essentiellement contestables » qui ne peuvent être résolus.

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Can you tell me, Socrates – is virtue something
that can be taught? Or does it come by practice?
Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it
to a man but natural aptitude or something else?

– Plato, Meno §70.

Introduction: Morality and the Liberal Arts

The overriding aim of higher education is, in the widest sense, a moral one: to help people to become better citizens. But citizenship – participation in local, regional, or national communities – is a complex idea, and one that involves more than just showing up at the polls. It embraces at least three distinct, but overlapping and interconnected, forms of community: civic, economic, and cultural. All forms of learning (including STEM learning, vocational training, and pre-professional study) are valuable, both to the individual and the community, because they prepare the individual to be part of, and contribute to, that community. A liberal education is by no means a prerequisite for citizenship of any particular kind, and societies also need the particular skills and expertise that STEM and vocational training provide. What makes the liberal arts tradition unique is that it prepares students for a potential trifecta: a pathway to all three types of citizenship.

We can't talk about the liberal arts, however, or about education as a pathway to productive citizenship, without raising moral questions. For that matter, we can't talk about communities of any kind, learning or otherwise, without recognizing them as an essentially moral enterprise.

This is no accident. The ethical realm permeates education because learning is an interactive process, and human interaction is what gives rise to moral conflicts in the first place. There are no moral values or moral problems in a one-person or a zero-person universe, or for isolated cave-dwelling hermits. But put two or more people together in any context, be it a desert island or lifeboat, dorm or classroom, family, team, committee, subway platform, association, corporation, or public agency, and an ethical dimension

emerges. It emerges due to the potential for conflict, either in the form of competition for some resource (such as money, jobs, honors, space, health, love, opportunities, etc.) or through harm or claims of having been harmed.

In one sense at least, moral thinking is unnatural to us. As individuals, we are more immediately attuned to our own needs, feelings, and goals, and less to those of others. Instinctively – except as parents – our interests come first; selves are selfish. Moral thinking, by definition, urges us to look beyond our own interests and consider others coequally. In addition to such selfishness, our natural "groupishness" and affinities – to family, clan, community, nation, faith, profession, political party – bind us to certain groups and blind us (on the formulation of Jonathan Haidti) to others. Morality asks us to look beyond the self and its affinity groups and consider the prima facie moral worth of others.

Good citizens aren't just politically, economically, and culturally engaged. They are also moral citizens, at least in this limited but fundamental sense: they have regard for the interests of others, even when those interests conflict with their own. (No conflict, no problem.) They don't just obey the law, but also recognize that law can't regulate every facet of human conduct.

The very notion of a "citizen" in fact, has an ethical component. Like language and thought, it is essentially social: about what we do as members of communities, as opposed to what we do in our homes, on lonely forest paths, with other consenting adults, or in other private moments. If citizenship has a moral dimension, and education is primarily preparation for the various forms of citizenship, so must education have a moral dimension. So thought Plato, and most philosophers since.

We also evolve morally – as individuals, as nations, and as a species. Such evolution is never linear; but adults are more ethically aware than five-year-olds, and we no longer tolerate slavery, exploitation, cruelty, or other abuses as much as in the past. Consider the slow and unsteady progress of civil rights in North America for minorities of color, gender, or orientation. Laws, norms, and cultures evolve slowly and imperfectly – but they evolve.ii

So, in what sense or senses, exactly, is education a moral enterprise, and where are the relevant boundaries? What moral differences can we tolerate, and what differences are intolerable, in the universe of higher learning? And how, if at all, does education make us better people? This much is clear: virtue isn't simply based on acquired knowledge. An illiterate person may be fundamentally

more decent, honest, peaceful, or altruistic than someone with more education. Likewise, the values of "primitive" tribes may be more humane and caring than those of more complex communities. Animals also display various types of intra-species affection and cooperation as well as competition, although interspecies it's more often dog-eat-dog. Humans' only clear claim to superiority is that we can at least think and talk about being nice to one another and can organize our moral consensus through democratic institutions.

Yet while basic moral decency doesn't correlate with education levels, neither is it entirely inborn; it's at least partly acquired by teaching and example. If we were all born good, we wouldn't need parents or other role models and authority figures (at least not for moral purposes). Nor would we need laws, police, or the concept of morality or moral discourse.

Moral questions arise at natural logical intervals, so to speak: within the context of education generally; within the anthropocentric liberal arts more specifically; and within the value-centric humanities in particular. This is because many, if not most, forms of knowledge seek to elucidate human relationships, institutions, motivations, and the causes and effects of actions, practices, traditions, beliefs, resources, etc. All of these interactions involve the possibility of competition for resources or infringements of one person or group on the agency of another. Moreover, we each have our own personal moral thresholds, priorities, and tolerances, whether innate or acquired; and we place different limits on ourselves and others. Much of the time, those limits and tolerances overlap. It's when they don't that we have problems to talk about.

In sum, there is an intuitive, but also complex and fraught, connection between higher education and moral thought and conduct. As I'll suggest in this essay, there are at least six distinct (but interrelated) axes along which higher learning and morality intersect. Ranging from the general to the particular, these axes include: policy, relating to the social and political context of higher education; communication, based on the moral character of language itself; content, insofar as moral issues arise within the curriculum, and around what it should include; the learning process and its institutional setting as moral arenas; the individual student as a moral agent and the question of character; and the mission of liberal education, in terms of promoting moral citizenship and citizenship in general.

1. The Policy Axis in Brief

I'll consider each of these axes of moral engagement – beginning with a glance at policy questions, which are highly topical but lie beyond the scope of the present work. The aim here is not to address specific issues, but rather to map their context, how they relate to one another and to the liberal arts, and to suggest some general parameters of moral citizenship.

While avoiding that Pandora's Box, however, it's fitting to note that the public policy dimension of liberal learning is the most important one for society in general, if not for a particular student or institution. That box contains a host of urgent and contested issues and debates that belong in the forefront of any democracy: Who should pay for education, and how? Who should have access to it, in what form, and at what cost? How should liberal learning be valued and distributed as a social good, and weighed against STEM or other types of learning? What impact can or should higher education have on society and class structure? What are colleges and universities' obligations to society, and how should they (for example) select their students and faculty, treat their waste, invest their endowments? And so on.

It isn't the case that all value differences can, or should, be resolved once and for all. Within certain parameters the essence of a democracy is contestability – not the achievement of permanent closure in moral, political, or other normative debates, but the capacity to have such debates ad infinitum and to accept temporary resolutions. Beyond a core of shared values that function as preconditions of any meaningful community, we don't, and cannot, all agree on the scope of ethical constraints in general – including those surrounding the learning process itself. Invariably, we differ as to where lines should be drawn between the self and others, or between the self and society: between freedom to perform actions and freedom from the actions that others may perform; between individual responsibility and seemingly exculpatory explanations based on outside causal influences.

Ultimately these are often political questions, because law establishes the baseline of public morality, and politics is us: as citizens, we decide who makes the law. Even in an imperfect democracy, there is at least some potential for collective self-improvement. Indeed, the same condition of contestability affects the range of ideological views in a democracy; this is why we talk to (or past) each other and tolerate all but the most extreme views, i.e.,

those that threaten civil discourse itself. At best, we can hope to better understand and tolerate different viewpoints – not to embrace them or see them evaporate. And we can understand why certain questions just don't go away – why we invariably can, and do, differ on them.

2. Language as a Moral Arena

As the principal medium of thought, language is also the vehicle of most moral discourse. You may prefer to shake your finger at someone, make a facial gesture, or slap them – but these are expressions of emotion or assertions of power, not arguments. Language is a moral enterprise because moral arguments are formed with words; because words can do harm; because withholding information can also do harm; and because words can be used to deceive, obscure, or manipulate. To lie, conceal relevant truths, exaggerate or understate, or to speak insincerely in order to elicit a reaction, imbue or reinforce a belief, or to stimulate or repress a particular response, is to abuse one's audience. Public discourse, however logically or factually flawed, demands communication in good faith.

Not all of our language is equally morally charged, and at least some of it isn't obviously morally charged at all. ("Nice day, huh?"). But every utterance is a normative act of a kind, as a claim about what it is important for you to know. (You should know something about the Civil War – it's the greatest event in our history.) And implied value judgments tend to creep into our casual utterances – in tone, if not in the words themselves. (Nice day – you should turn off the TV and get outside. And by the way, what's with the sweater?). As such, language is seldom entirely value-neutral. More often, it's effectively a potential mode of action, inseparable from the actions that are its frequent causes and effects. We use words to make assertions and arguments, issue commands, to forbid, warn, wonder, scold, commend, critique, incite, and exhort, as well as to identify, announce, explain, or demonstrate.

Speech is also selective and economic: it takes time and energy to say one thing and not another. Choices must be made, trade-offs acknowledged, priorities set. (Just how far am I willing to go to explain Lincoln's views on slavery, or the ambiguities in the idea of honor, shame, or respect? How much of an explanation do I owe you – and how are that decision and that explanation influenced by my

values?) We communicate to change the world (or to keep it the same, as the case may be) by modifying the knowledge or beliefs (or values or intentions) of an audience. In doing so, we may also offend or harm, empower or enfeeble, ignore, incite, short-change, inspire, bore, or annoy.

In shaping information – by selecting, distorting, exaggerating, sublimating, contextualizing, de-contextualizing, etc. – we implicitly manipulate our audience to achieve some effect. That is reason enough to watch what we (and others) say. The language of critical inquiry, and of democratic discourse, has a particular normative context of its own, based on the ideas of community and rationality that are embedded in the use language itself. Reasoning well involves a commitment to mutual understanding and transparency rather than obfuscation, and to avoiding or offsetting the logical and moral pitfalls inherent in language.

Like grammar, reasoning involves thinking and speaking according to acknowledged rules and conventions, to achieve clarity, depth, breadth, and precision. It thereby sustains a kind of community that would otherwise deteriorate into mere polemic if, for example, we assumed our own superiority; ignored other viewpoints than our own; showed unwarranted trust or distrust; used stale or loaded expressions for effect; treated rumor as fact; or failed to identify common as well as contested ground. There is no "final" list of such uncritical devices, and no infallible formula for avoiding them. Doing so requires constant attention and open dialogue. Because we are imperfect, it's a never-ending struggle toward self- and mutual improvement.

3. Moral Issues in the Curriculum

A third moral axis of the liberal arts consists of the broad range of problems and conflicts that arise within the subject matter itself across the disciplinary spectrum. This axis is inevitable, since we're talking about a spectrum embracing the study of nature, human nature, social behavior, and the products of human imagination. In all these areas of inquiry, questions arise about human decisions, actions, and conflicts. They arise whenever we consider the consequences of economic or political choices, historical accountability, or study the mind, behavior, institutions, or communities.

The humanities, as a rubric focused mainly on the arts and human values, raise moral questions most directly. They emerge in

the lives and choices of fictional characters; the ethical orientations of poetry or theater; the responsibilities of the artist or writer; problems of crime, punishment, causal agency and responsibility; community and competing affinities; religious traditions and social mores: in short, almost anywhere one looks in the curriculum. Was Captain Ahab demonic? Can we measure the aftereffects of slavery in a post-slavery society with complete dispassion? What makes "terrorism" a pejorative term and "insurgency" a neutral one? What version of democracy is best, and which reading of the Constitution? What information do we have a right or a duty to obtain, to share, to withhold, under what circumstances, and what types of transparency or candor do critical inquiry and citizenship require?

But we also grapple with moral issues in thinking about a range of problems beyond the humanities: income distribution in economics; authenticity and provenance in art; the ethics of research on isolated tribes, or of psychological and medical testing and research; the global and community responsibilities of scientists. Moral questions arise in different ways and degrees, and in different terms, across the curriculum, and they resist assimilation to a simple conceptual frame. This is because (notwithstanding the broad description outlined earlier) morality itself isn't a simple conceptual frame.

I would suggest two reasons for this shape-shifting. One is the aforementioned idea of contestability. Moral questions are divided (rather sharply, I suspect) between those which we must contest, because there are equally legitimate and dignified but incompatible ways of viewing them, and those questions which we cannot contest, because doing so would be inimical to discourse itself. For example, we can't argue productively about the character of murder, assault, or slavery, or the value of telling the truth. To do so would weaken the very underpinnings of the moral enterprise.

A second reason why morality is complex is that we encounter it in many different guises, shadings, and contexts: as questions about truth, trust, loyalty, obligation, integrity, justice, honor, mercy, shame, etc. It can't be reduced to rights and duties, or to an overall concept of the public good – although these are arguably of paramount importance. Sometimes we need to talk about rights, sometimes about virtues; and sometimes (as in dire cases where human lives are at stake and there is no ideal solution) we may need to think like utilitarians, weighing possible outcomes against each other and counting the bodies.

Hence, the concept of morality is based (to use Wittgenstein's term) on family resemblance: i.e., on cases sharing from among a set of attributes rather than on a single shared attribute or set of attributes. Wittgenstein calls this condition "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing…" iii All of the conceptual members of the moral family are variants of conflicts and principles relating to conduct and conceptions of the good, embedded in particular cases, contexts, conditions, and lines of inquiry or forms of knowledge.

4. The Learning Environment

Like all institutions, schools generate moral questions because they are communities: groups of interacting individuals in close proximity, with an ostensible common purpose but also diverse roles, aims, and interests. And like any community where there is potential for conflict, either among individuals or between individuals and the institution, they are moral communities.ivFor this and other reasons, colleges and universities are also laboratories of democratic life. They are exceptional insofar as they are artificial, intentional communities, each having a unique institutional character and focus, traditions, and student body; they confer upon their students some of the advantages, and some of the responsibilities, of actual citizenship.

To be effective incubators of citizenship, such communities must sponsor peaceful conversations among diverse participants with diverse values. And they need to do this while recognizing that students are there primarily to learn, professors to teach, and staff to facilitate the process. In educational settings, as in democracy generally, this need for civil conversation imposes certain burdens of restraint and negotiation, because of its inherent informality: the relevant standards of tolerance and respect, truth-seeking, and intellectual excellence can't always be formally codified or regulated.

As in any social setting, certain baseline forms of moral equality need to be observed; but this cannot mean that one's values are never challenged. It's not a form of persecution or indignity; a disagreement isn't a personal attack. As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them." v A recent study by the American Association of University Professors echoes Emerson's words: "The presumption that students need to be protected rather than

challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual." vi

The idea of respect is a quintessentially moral one: a deference to, or regard for, the needs, rights, or interests of others. But it's also a vague and vexing idea; it touches on what is deepest in us, but we have different notions of what it means and how far it goes. Who doesn't want to be respected? Is it something we earn or something to which we're entitled? What it means depends partly on the context.

In fact, there is a crucial ambiguity among several fundamentally different senses of "respect." One sense revolves around a person's intrinsic moral worth; another refers to a particular type of moral credit, or the acknowledgement of someone having acted virtuously or earned a certain status. A third sense of respect is more passive and limited: it's about granting mutual moral space – a willingness not to judge, or at least not to interfere, since nothing can stop us from thinking or judging.

Claims for respect sometimes obscure or exploit this ambiguity, implicitly demanding approval or recognition, when all that is warranted is tolerance. vii Freedom of speech compels our noninterference; it doesn't compel us to agree with whatever we hear, or to forbear from giving or receiving criticism. The failure to make this distinction is a common lapse of critical thinking in the public sphere. Civility and controversy must co-exist; any democratic community requires both.

Inevitably, there are further complications. Many moral boundaries are inherently fuzzy and contestable, and difficult to stipulate, let alone to regulate. Even truth-telling can be problematic, and at times there are uncertain boundaries, for example, between borrowing and plagiarizing, between proper and inadequate citation, or between legitimate criticism and needless offense.viii When Huck Finn uses the n-word, does that make him – or Mark Twain – a racist? Such boundaries tend to be embedded in a particular culture or community, and not in specific rules, codes, acts, or utterances. Moral climate control is difficult and imperfect; climates are vague, implicit, and change over time.

5. Character and Citizenship: The Student as Moral Agent

Another axis of intersection between morality and liberal education is around the vexing question of character: How exactly, if at all,

can we learn to be better human beings, and better citizens? Can we expect a liberal education to improve us in some particular way? Character (to use the necessarily vague umbrella term) is the most problematic facet of the prismatic relationship between the moral life and liberal learning, and one that raises a number of subsidiary questions about ethical development. Above all, two contrasting perspectives on moral education seem equally difficult either to reconcile or to dismiss outright. One claims we can learn to be good – or at least better; the other claims that we cannot.

The idea of education as a direct route to moral improvement may seem quaint but it has a long history. Liberal learning has traditionally been understood as a rite of passage of character, with theology serving, roughly from Medieval times until the 19th century, as the primary tool of moral engineering. Indeed, faith and virtue in the Judeo-Christian tradition have seldom been viewed as separable ideas. The subject of moral education was central in Plato's Republic, and again two thousand years later in Rousseau's Emile. More recently, scholars such as Claude Levi-Straus have written about the incremental stages of intellectual sophistication, while Lawrence Kohlberg and others have explored the stages of moral awareness through which we pass from childhood to adolescence and adulthood. It seems counterintuitive to suppose these trajectories are wholly unrelated.

And yet, the very idea of formal "moral education" is problematic and ill-suited to our times. We understand moral character as something that is largely formed long before one reaches college age. Heredity, early development, parenting, peers, authority figures, and other formative experiences all presumably play a role in that process. With certain tragic exceptions, most people understand that inflicting gratuitous harm is wrong before they show up for class. What remains to be learned – or unlearned – about decency, fairness, or truth-telling?

Even more objectionable is the idea that higher education (any more than, say, religious devotion or military service) can confer some sort of ethical advantage or status that others do not enjoy. That would have uncomfortable implications if it were even partially true. Yet we all know (or know of) people whose moral character – whether measured in terms of civility, altruism, law-abidance, integrity, or otherwise – doesn't correlate with their professed faith or level of education.

On the other hand, however, saying that we learn nothing of moral value through higher education (or, for that matter, through

religion, sports, the military, or any other presumably socializing activity) isn't satisfying either. It implies that we are uniquely influenced by our genes and early influences, and that at some point our capacity for moral growth stops. On this view, being part of a learning community, with all the costs and benefits that entails, is inevitably a growth process, and thus also one of ethical development: a process of learning to get along, to share classrooms and dorm rooms, to argue for our views and expose them to challenge, allow them to evolve, and accept irresolvable differences.

To this, the moral education skeptic might reply: what exactly does one gain from the experience of higher learning that couldn't be gained from working in a diner, a coal mine, or a submarine? The skeptic certainly has a point; yet it doesn't mean that these diverse paths aren't all potential avenues of moral growth. We can no longer say that a college education improves our characters. And yet, we don't want to think of it as morally inert either.

One possible way of mitigating this dilemma might be framed as follows. Our fundamental characters aren't changed by higher learning per se, at least not in ways that other forms of community don't also provide. We may or may not become more ethically aware as we grow and phase through various socializing communities, including family, schools, civic and cultural activities, jobs, and the like. Having roommates and classmates may not make us better human beings; but like other experiences, albeit perhaps more intentionally, it can mobilize our pre-existing moral resources to make us better moral citizens. It isn't necessarily character-building – but if it's anything at all worthwhile, it's community-building.

One might further argue that our pre-existing ethical condition largely determines the use we make of these community-building opportunities. The potential for civic education isn't a purely structural effect of being in school. It all depends on the background and motivation of the individual student and what they make of the opportunity. The experience of community and critical inquiry potentially enlarges our vision of the world and our place in it – conflicts and all. It doesn't provide ready solutions to moral problems, but it can provide foundations for civic empowerment.

Liberal education, in other words, is not a substitute for basic socialization, nor does it compensate for the lack thereof. Its function in the ethical realm is not to make us better or more law-abiding in our daily lives, but to promote a kind of civic literacy: the ability to recognize, have informed opinions about, and participate

in, moral discussions; to separate fact from opinion and principle, and the consensual from the contestable; to work effectively in groups and communities. Like critical thinking, such literacy, while difficult to define or codify, is an essential civic skill.

6. Moral Citizenship and the Limits of Neutrality

Does the need to teach the skills of citizenship entail a kind of moral agnosticism on the part of the school, the teacher, and the student? Yes, but only up to a point. Such agnosticism doesn't compel indifference or setting aside one's beliefs; rather, it creates a safe space for different views. But there are certain key exceptions (or perhaps qualifications) to such moral agnosticism in the educational setting, just as there are in parallel democratic communities such as legislatures, courtrooms, newsrooms, or living rooms.

One is the overriding need for civility and tolerance of differences; and such civility means talking, listening, not insulting, not personalizing, and showing due respect – meaning respect of the important but limited kind. But if civility is a precondition of effective teaching and learning, it is not without its own boundary problems.

Words matter and need to be treated with care. Some words have encoded derogatory meanings (varying with the speaker, the hearer, and the context); and some words that are debatable in terms of their meaning, relevance, or appropriateness. But arguing over particular words is often misguided or misses the larger point. Political correctness is a two-way street: it can be a bulwark against incivility, or a shield for bigotry – and we can't always read other people's minds and hearts. Better to heed Hobbes: words are "wise men's counters, they do but reckon with them, but they are the money of fools."[ix] We mustn't ask too much of them, as demagogues do. Particular words must not take the place of discourse, which is where the "money" of clear and reasonable communication is.

The second qualification is that the Siamese-twin values of truth-telling and truth-seeking are paramount and non-negotiable (however much we may argue about what is the truth, and what truth is). By any reckoning, truth is a moral as well as an intellectual value: the basis of all trust, intellectual integrity, and excellence. The pursuit of it is something we owe to one another in any community of learning. There can be no arguing about the moral status of lying, cheating or plagiarism – only about when they occur.

However committed we may be to truth and civility, we can't leave our moral principles in the hallway when we enter a classroom or laboratory; we aren't automatons, and learning isn't a robotic or mechanical activity. Commitment is a good thing, as long as it doesn't get in the way of figuring out why the economy is tanking or what the white whale represents in "Moby-Dick." As citizens with moral agendas, we also have political agendas; indeed, in any coherent worldview, political agendas are moral agendas, projected on a larger society-wide screen. Both are about power relationships, one's role in society, and one's duties and rights vis à vis other people, institutions, and government. x

In talking about agendas or ideologies, moreover, it should be clearly understood that ideology is what drives the democratic process. If we didn't have ideological differences, we wouldn't need that process. Democracy (like its handmaiden, higher education) is a system for managing and reflecting those differences, not for avoiding or eliminating them. Terms such as "agenda," "bias," and "partisan bickering" are often used to falsely suggest otherwise.

Thus, if we can't avoid moral questions in the learning environment, for similar reasons we can't avoid political ones either. It's often appropriate or necessary to bring one's values to bear on, say, theories of human behavior, works of art, or accounts of the past. Can one talk about Picasso's "Guernica," or the causes of the Great Depression or the 2008 economic collapse, from a standpoint of absolute neutrality? Facts are where we start from, but they are seldom sufficient; how we select, frame, and interpret them is often just as important.

Again, can one examine slavery without at least implicitly condemning it? And what about human trafficking, exploitation of children, racism, sexism, xenophobia, religious bias, or the panoply of lesser oppressions? Can we agree on how bad these are, what the appropriate remedies may be, or how much to emphasize them in the curriculum? At some point, they inevitably become contestable issues. At the same time, however, unyielding political agendas can also be antithetical to critical inquiry, especially where they inhibit opposing views or obscure larger truths. Higher education is about expanding our conceptual and normative perspectives, not entrenching them. It's about locating the regions of contestability, more than it is about arguing within them.

7. Speech is Special

There is one final contentious question that can't be avoided. It doesn't equate directly with questions of truth or civility, though they overlap. Uninhibited free speech, the proverbial lifeblood of democracy, is as crucial on campuses as elsewhere in an open society. Speech is nevertheless a particularly fraught issue, and has been so at least since at least the 1980's, as demands for "politically correct" discourse (mostly from the left) and assaults on it (mostly from the right) have divided the academy and the wider culture. It is about how we talk, but also about what we say.

Speech in general, and certain words in particular, can do emotional as well as other forms of harm. That's why there are laws against perjury, blackmail, defamation, and public endangerment. Depending on the context, words may jeopardize someone's safety, dignity, legal status, reputation, opportunities, pocketbook, family relations, etc. But public discourse is a highway, not a private drive. Traffic must move freely in all directions. Speech that we disagree with or abhor must be protected to keep it moving.

Attacks on political correctness often defend vile speech. But intolerance of intolerant speech does the greater harm. Prior restraint, via censorship or formal speech codes, is not the democratic answer, and doesn't prepare students for the unregulated rough-and-tumble of a democratic society. Criticism – answering speech with speech – is the answer. We should condemn bigotry or other vile speech whenever it's uttered; but there can only be free speech if it includes the good, the bad, and ugly. Shutting down certain words reflects a lack of confidence in an institution's channels of discourse to allow a proper airing of the ideas, values, and emotions in play. It also ignores the wide variety of contexts in which particular words may be used, and the variety of intended meanings they may have. And the ugly meanings ascribed to certain words can easily shift over time to other words. That's why, as Hobbes said, words are merely "wise men's counters."

If there's one lesson to be drawn from America's long struggle toward a "more perfect union," it's that speech, not silence or censorship, guides the way. Freedom of speech can never be absolute; nothing is absolute – not even the sanctity of human life, in cases where all alternatives are catastrophic. But only in the most extreme cases (such as libel or slander, threats to public safety or national security, child pornography) should we limit what people can say. We would do better to recall which freedoms the Founders

chose to enshrine in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, before all others, and why.

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[i] Haidt, *The Rightous Mind* (2012).

[ii] The question of what counts as "immoral" or "transgressive" raises larger questions of moral theory which this essay cannot explore in depth. But it's worth noting that we can only use these terms if we assume at least a *general* common understanding of what they mean – which doesn't settle those larger questions.

[iii] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66.

[iv] To speak of a "moral community" in this sense doesn't mean an ideal or virtuous community. It simply means a community in which moral considerations are relevant, because human beings conflict, and certain codes are enforced. We need to distinguish this sense of moral from the ideal sense, of what we deem to be morally right or fair.

[v] Emerson, "Circles."

[vi] AAUP, "On Trigger Warnings" (Aug. 2014). Retrieved from: www.aaup.org/report/ trigger-warnings.

[vii] A fourth kind of respect, arguably, is that which we owe to those who have suffered or sacrificed on our behalf or in a worthy cause.

[viii] "Truth-telling" here is distinct from the general educational process of "truth-seeking." It's not about locating elusive facts or probabilities about the world, or explanatory models, but about disclosing specific information that one is morally obligated to disclose.

[ix] Hobbes, The Leviathan (1651), Pt. 1, Ch. 4.

[x] Any political theory presupposes a moral viewpoint, but I would argue that the reverse is not the case. Because morality is first of all about how we interact directly with others, unless we are hermits we all have a moral orientation, even if it is unconscious or by default. But no one is obligated to have a conscious political orientation: one can choose to remain apathetic regarding the larger world beyond one's immediate moral universe.

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