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## PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS, AND THE END OF LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

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From elementary schools to colleges and graduate schools, education in the STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) is widely considered far more valuable to society—because it is believed to be more technologically and economically productive—than education in the humanities, such as philosophy, classical literature, history, and the other non-STEM liberal arts. At its most extreme, this valuation of STEM education over non-STEM education takes the form of blatant denigration of study in the humanities.

U.S. senator and former Republican presidential candidate Marco Rubio, for example, has made a habit of disparaging the study of philosophy in his remarks about education reform, repeatedly joking along the campaign trail that “the job market for ancient Greek philosophers has been very tight for 2,000 years.” In one seemingly well-intentioned attempt during a Republican debate to promote the value of technical trade schools, Rubio made the arguably false (and ungrammatical) claim that “welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders and less philosophers.” The audience responded with enthusiastic applause.

Such devaluation of the humanities is by no means a distinctively American attitude. In June of 2015, Japan’s Minister of Education Hakubun Shimomura ordered Japan’s national universities to begin taking “active steps to abolish [social science and humanities] organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society’s needs.”<sup>1</sup>

## PHILOSOPHY AND FUZZINESS

As a philosophy professor, I am grateful to be on the faculty at an institution that remains committed to education in the full spectrum of the liberal arts. Yet there nevertheless exists here at my institution a strong culture of valuing STEM over and above the non-STEM liberal arts. This is reflected in the fact that our students (and even some of our instructors) refer to STEM courses as “tech” courses and to non-STEM courses as “fuzzy” courses. While I do not think most of them use the term fuzzy intentionally as a term of derision, a negative connotation is apparent. When we use the term fuzzy to describe a puppy or a teddy bear, we mean that it is soft or wooly, and the connotation is generally positive. When people use the term fuzzy to describe an idea or area of thought, however, they typically mean that it is indistinct, vague, unclear, and perhaps even incoherent.

Though the negative connotation is lamentable, to anyone who is familiar with Plato’s famous allegory of the cave (from Book VII of the *Republic*), this description of philosophy as fuzzy should not be entirely surprising. Plato’s allegory suggests that the surface-level physical realities, social constructs, and entertainment that command society’s attention are like shadows cast by a fire on the wall of a dimly lit cave. He argued that most people focus for their entire lives on the shadows, ignorant of the real world above, but that philosophy—understood as the loving pursuit of wisdom—can help lead people up and out of the cave into the real world illuminated by the sun. Plato recognized that anyone who had spent their life gazing upon the shadows in the cave of ignorance initially would not be able to see things clearly in the brilliant light of the sun. Their vision would be blurred at first, and the true, good, and beautiful world above would appear, for lack of a better word, fuzzy.

It is thus not entirely surprising that many of my students find it natural to describe philosophy as a fuzzy discipline. They have become so accustomed to thinking of the goal of education in terms of solving technical and economic problems through clever application of scientific and mathematical formulae that when they are confronted with questions about the fundamental nature of reality, the structure of knowledge and understanding, the foundations of right and wrong, and the human condition, they often find that their vision is not as clear as it was when their eyes were glued to their technical problem sets (or, more likely, to the high-definition screens of their smartphones and laptops).

The value of philosophy and study in the humanities more generally, however, is that it can, when done in a spirit of intellectual humility, openness, and perseverance, lead away from the mesmerizing appeal of shallow entertainment and beyond mere

technical knowledge to the kind of deep understanding, wisdom, and clear moral vision that characterizes the best of our leaders and citizens. G. K. Chesterton put the point this way:

*Some people fear that philosophy will bore or bewilder them; because they think it is not only a string of long words, but a tangle of complicated notions. These people miss the whole point of the modern situation. These are exactly the evils that exist already; mostly for want of a philosophy. The politicians and the papers are always using long words. It is not a complete consolation that they use them wrong. The political and social relations are already hopelessly complicated. They are far more complicated than any page of medieval metaphysics; the only difference is that the medievalist could trace out the tangle and follow the complications; and the moderns cannot. The chief practical things of today, like finance and political corruption, are frightfully complicated. We are content to tolerate them because we are content to misunderstand them, not to understand them. The business world needs metaphysics — to simplify it.<sup>2</sup>*

Chesterton concluded that in order to solve the thorny social and political problems of our day, “What we need, as the ancients understood, is not a politician who is a business man, but a king who is a philosopher.”<sup>3</sup>

## **THE END OF PHILOSOPHY AND LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION**

The wise vision to which philosophy can contribute is needed for good leadership in the church, in business, economic policy, education, scientific research, politics, and the military. What is the value of building wealth if we don't have the wisdom to know how best to use that wealth for God's kingdom purposes? What good is it to know how to clone human beings if we lack the wisdom to navigate the moral quagmire of such radical biotechnology? Likewise, how dangerous might it be to know how to build or operate weapons for the military such as drones or the atomic bomb if we don't have the wisdom to know whether and how it might be morally permissible to use them? (One would think that Japan's leaders would be particularly sensitive to the importance of such military applications of the distinction between technical knowledge and moral wisdom.)

Moreover, if winning the war on global terrorism depends on our winning a battle for “the hearts and minds” of potential terrorists and the communities in which they live, then effectively combating terrorism will require the intellectual creativity, courage, perseverance, and humility to ask difficult questions, to live, at least for a time, with some fuzzy answers, and the wisdom eventually to see clearly through all of the

cultural, psychological, and ethical complexities. As John Kaag and David O’Hara aptly summarize the point in a recent article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “If the aim of education is to gain money and power, where can we turn for help in knowing what to do with that money and power? Only disordered minds think that these are ends in themselves.”<sup>4</sup>

The traditional goal—the proper end—of liberal arts education is not to prepare students to get a high-paying job but to contribute to their intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation so that they become free (liberated) to think for

themselves, to evaluate popular assumptions critically, to understand the complex world in which they live, and to deepen their appreciation and love for that which is true, and good, and beautiful. The study of philosophy can contribute to the achievement of this goal by helping students to develop and deepen intellectual skills and virtues such as critical thinking, logical argumentation, creative problem solving, open-mindedness, intellectual humility, and love of truth. These intellectual skills and virtues are not only valuable for a variety of professions but also contribute to human flourishing in other noneconomic ways. For the Christian, philosophy also can aid in understanding, clarifying, and clearly articulating the doctrines of the Christian faith. For this reason, medieval Christian scholars commonly described philosophy as “the handmaiden of theology.”

Of course, studying philosophy is no guaranteed path to wisdom, and it can (when done in the wrong environment and with the wrong goals) lead to vices instead of virtues. The study of philosophy can encourage intellectual vices such as pride and intellectual stubbornness, and philosophers can become skilled at marshaling persuasive arguments in support of false views. That is why the apostle Paul warned the Colossian Christians, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (Col. 2:8 ESV). Yet even Paul, a tentmaker by trade (see Acts 18:3), studied the popular philosophies of his own day and was able and willing to engage in philosophical dialogue with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in Athens. Rather than merely looking for false aspects of their philosophies to criticize, Paul capitalized on common ground in order to preach the gospel more effectively (see Acts 17).

Whatever their vocation, Christians in our pluralistic culture would do well to follow Paul’s example by working to understand and engage critically with the popular philosophies of our own day and to think philosophically about the fundamental questions of truth, meaning, and value that matter for all people. Rather than applauding political campaigns to end the study of philosophy and the humanities,

therefore, Christians must help our culture rediscover the proper end — that is, the goal — of higher education in the liberal arts.

To be sure, not every Christian should go to a four-year college. A degree from a four-year liberal arts college is no guarantee of wisdom or happiness, and it certainly is not a necessary condition for virtue and human flourishing. In fact, it isn't even a necessary condition for a liberal-arts education. It is possible, though no doubt difficult, to become very well educated in the sciences, the humanities, and the arts outside of the context of formal education.

Moreover, Rubio is right to point out that technical trades are noble vocations and that we as a society should value (perhaps more than we do) postsecondary education at the trade schools that prepare students for such callings. As Hank Hanegraaff is fond of saying, "The gospel is free, but somebody has to put in the plumbing." Of course, Hank's point is that churches and parachurch ministries cannot do their important work that advances the kingdom of God in this world without the necessary financial resources, but it is equally true that Christian ministries (and, indeed, all of us who live in homes, drive vehicles, take public transit or airline flights, work in buildings, walk on sidewalks, use computers, etc.) depend heavily on the skilled workmanship of tradespeople every day. So, I repeat, not every Christian student should attend a four-year college. Neither should every Christian student who pursues an undergraduate degree from a liberal arts college major in philosophy. We need professionals and scholars who specialize in a variety of disciplines of study, and any good liberal arts college will educate all of its students broadly, regardless of their chosen majors. Yet, given the value of philosophy and the humanities for helping us to see the complexities of the human condition and the world in which we live more clearly, the church and our nation would be well served if more Christians engaged in formational study of the full spectrum of the liberal arts — especially philosophy — whether they plan to become professional philosophers, politicians, physicians, pastors, plumbers, or, yes, even welders.<sup>5</sup>

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## NOTES

- 1 Jack Grove, "Social Sciences and Humanities Faculties 'to Close' in Japan after Ministerial Intervention," *Times Higher Education*, September 14, 2015, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/social-sciences-and-humanities-faculties-close-japanafter-ministerial-intervention>.
- 2 G. K. Chesterton, "The Revival of Philosophy – Why?" available online at <http://www.chesterton.org/the-revival-of-philosophy-why/>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 John Kaag and David O'Hara, "Big Brains, Small Minds," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 13, 2016, <http://chronicle.com/article/Big-Brains-Small-Minds/236480>.
- 5 The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Air Force, the US Department of Defense, or the US government.