Socratic questioning is still on trial. Our debates over the curriculum reveal the same nostalgia for a more obedient, more regimented, time critically about the social origins of apparently timeless moral norms, the distinction between convention and nature. He will learn to construct arguments on his own, heedless of authority. He won’t do much marching. Study with me, he concludes, and you will look like a philosopher, you will have a big tongue, a sunken, narrow chest, soft buttocks, and big genitals (a minus in those days, symbolic of a lack of self-restraint). Socrates’ self-advertisement, of course, is being swiftly scripted by the conservative opposition. The message: The new education will subvert morally self-controlled, turn young people into sex-obsessed rebels, and destroy the city.

The son soon goes home and produces a relativist argument for the conclusion that he should beat his father. It goes: “I’ve learned that all human norms, that all timeless moral norms, have merely had a human origin. I’m a human being, so I can produce a new moral norm that sons should bear their fathers in return.” The angry father then takes a torch and burns down the Think-Academy. (It’s not made clear whether the son is still inside.)

Twenty-five years later, Socrates, on trial for corrupting the young, cites Aristophanes’ play as a major source of the prejudice against him. Should a liberal education be acculturated into the time-honored values of one’s own culture? Or, should it follow Socrates, arguing that the examined life is the best preparation for citizenship?

Socraticism and the Stoics
Almost 300 years later, in the very different culture of the Roman empire of the first century A.D., the philosopher Seneca reflected on
the same contrast, creating in the process our modern concept of a liberal education. Seneca begins his letter by describing a traditional style of education, noting that it's called "liberal"—literally—because it is supposed to be an education for well-brought-up gentlemen, who were called "liberals"—the well-born. But he now turns to the defense of the Socratic tradition: "Even so," he announces, "we use the term liberal in a very different way.

In his view, an education is truly liberal—by which he means connected to freedom (libertas)—only if it is one that liberates the student's mind, encouraging him or her to take charge of his or her own thinking, leading to a Socratic, examined life, and becoming a reflective critic of traditional practices. I say "mind or heart" not out of contemporary political correctness; scholars in the first century A.D. wrote at length about the equal education of women, defending the view that women as much as men should lead the examined life.

Seneca goes on to argue that only liberal education will develop each person's capacity to be fully human, by which he means self-aware, self-governing, and capable of recognizing and respecting the humanity of our fellow human beings, no matter where they are born, no matter what social class they inhabit, no matter what their gender or ethnic origin. "Soon we shall breathe our last," he concludes in his related work, On Anger. "Meanwhile, while we live, while we are among human beings, let us cultivate our humanity."

Contemporary liberal education

In contemporary America, as in ancient Athens and Rome, liberal education is changing. New topics have entered liberal arts curriculums of colleges and universities—the history and culture of non-Western peoples and of ethnic and racial minorities within the U.S., the experiences and achievements of women, the histories and concerns of lesbians and gay men. These changes have frequently been presented in popular journalism as highly threatening, both to traditional standards of academic excellence and to traditional norms of citizenship. Parents are getting a picture of a monolithic, highly politicized elite attempting to enforce a politically correct view of human life, subverting traditional values, and teaching students, in effect, to argue in favor of father bearing.

Socratic questioning is still on trial. Our debates over the curriculum reveal the same nostalgia for a more obedient, more regimented, time; the same nervousness, of new and independent thinking expressed in Aristophanes' brilliant parable. But we can defend many changes in traditional models of liberal education as a response to the challenge posed by Socrates and by Seneca. The changes we witness are attempts to follow Seneca's advice—to cultivate our humanity.

In order to evaluate these changes taking place in colleges and universities, however, we have to look more closely at what is changing and why. What are faculty and students really doing and how do newly fashionable issues about human diversity affect what they do?

Campus models

To answer these questions, we should not look at only one or two well-known institutions, as so many books on this topic have done, but at a wide range, representative of the variety that currently exists in American higher education. Let me give an example.

St. Lawrence University is a small liberal arts college in upstate New York. In a brightly lit seminar room, a group of young faculty talk with excitement about their month-long visit to Kenya to study African village life. Having shared the daily lives of ordinary men and women, they've joined in local debates about nutrition, polygamy, AIDS, and much else, they are now incorporating their experience into their teaching—in courses in art history, philosophy, religion, women's studies, and others. Planning eagerly for the following summer's trip to India, they're meeting each week for an evening seminar on Indian culture and history. Group leaders Grant Cornell from philosophy and Eve Stoddard from English talk about how they teach students to think critically about cultural relativism, using careful philosophical questioning in the Socratic tradition to criticize the easy, but ultimately false, idea that tolerance requires us not to criticize anyone else's way of life.

In Riverside, California, it's the first day of the summer session at the University of California campus, and the ethnically mixed student body, by now more than 40 percent minority, crowds the campus green. Richard Lowy, a young white instructor in Ethnic Studies, talks rapidly to his research assistant, Yasmin Dalsaz. He describes the difficulty with teaching about immigration, assimilation, and the political struggles of new minorities in a political climate saturated with sensationalism, mistrust, and appeals to irrational emotion.

"Certainly," Lowy says, "there are some people who teach multiculturalism in a provocative way. I choose a more gentle approach. I try to tell everybody I'm not here to degrade, and I'm not here to condemn anybody for what your ancestors, relatives, or anybody did; I just try to explain what's going on, and I hope the knowledge I present will begin to affect people... I always tell people that you can either package your humanity in your politics, or you can package your politics in your humanity, and if you're really a decent human being, with the right attitude and the right heart and good faith toward people, it will come out. So I try to put things in that kind of perspective."

In Reno, at the University of Nevada campus, Yasmin talks with Eric Chalmers, a senior health science major from Carson City, who describes himself as having "more broadened ideas than some people at the university level." Chalmers, who has never heard of the recently introduced "diversity requirement," requiring new freshmen to take one course on a non-Western culture or on an ethnic or gender issue within the U.S., applauded the trend to internationalization, wishing he had had a chance to study Islam and the Middle East. But he criticizes a course on domestic violence because it seemed to him "too demeaning towards men."

As the interview is drawing to an end, Chalmers laughs, remembering something, "Here's another interesting thing. We were all too, like, 102 we had to write a letter putting ourselves in the shoes of a gay person, like breaking the news to our parents saying we were gay, and explaining our lifestyle to them. At the time,
Transformation is...
the idea that one would take responsibility for one's own reasoning and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason

Now, Socratic reasoning can be infused into a college curriculum in different ways, through instruction in many different departments. But my general conclusion, after examining a wide range of institutions, is that in a two-semester requirement in philosophy is the best way to promote the examined life. That may seem like professional chauvinism, but I really did find that working well in institutions of widely different types.

The campuses I've studied that do have such requirements are a highly mixed group, including Harvard, which has made moral reasoning a part of the core curriculum; Notre Dame—and of course the major Catholic colleges and universities where all undergraduates take philosophy in addition to the theology requirement; the University of Pittsburgh, where a similar requirement produces exciting teaching in ethics across the curriculum; and, finally, Bentley College, where students like Billy Tucker, bound for careers in marketing and business, nonetheless take quite rigorous philosophy courses.

Transformation is what Socrates and the Stoics had in mind: the idea that one would take responsibility for one's own reasoning and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason. It is an essential ingredient of a democracy that aims to be more than just a marketplace of clashing interest groups.

World citizenship
The second part of my proposal is the idea of world citizenship. Citizens who cultivate their humanity need to think of themselves as citizens of some local, regional group—but also, and above all, as human beings, bound to other human beings by ties of recognition and concern. We very easily think of ourselves in narrow group terms: as Americans first and foremost, and as human beings second. Or even more narrowly, as Italian-Americans or heterosexuals or African-Americans first, Americans second, human beings third—if at all. We neglect needs and capacities that link us to fellow citizens who live differently or look different from ourselves. This means that we're unaware of many aspects of communication and fellowship with them, and also of responsibilities we may have to them. We also often err by neglect of differences, simply assuming that lives in different places must be like ours, and lacking curiosity about what their lives are really like. Cultivating our humanity in a complex, interlocking world involves cultivating an understanding of the way common needs and aims are differently realized in highly different circumstances.

How should these issues be addressed in a college curriculum? Here solutions should be highly individual, with the resources of the institution and its particular student body in mind. And they must operate at a number of different levels. Building a curriculum for world citizenship has multiple aspects: the construction of basic required courses that expose students to unfamiliar cultural perspectives, the infusion of diverse perspectives throughout the curriculum, support for the development of more specialized elective courses in areas connected with business, cultural diversity, and finally, attention to the teaching of foreign languages.

Cultivating humanity
Three capacities, above all, are essential to the cultivation of humanity in today's world.

First, there is the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one's own traditions.

Second, what I call the capacity for epistemological access: we may call the examined life. This means, a life that accepts no belief that is authoritative simply because it has been handed down by tradition or becomes familiar through habit; a life that questions all beliefs and accepts only those that survive reason's demand for consistency and for justification.

Third, this capacity requires developing the capacity to reason logically; to test what one reads or says for consistency of reasoning, accuracy of fact, and, finally, of judgment.

Testing its sort frequently produces challenges to tradition, as Socrates knew well when he defended himself against the charge of corrupting the young. But he defended his activity on the grounds that democracy needs citizens who can think for themselves rather than simply deferring to authority, who can reason together about their choices rather than just trading claims and counterclaims. Our democracy, like ancient Athens, is prone to hasty and flabby reasoning, and in the substitution of instinct and sound bites in journalism for real deliberation. We need Socratic teaching to fulfill the promise of a democratic citizenship.
The narrative imagination means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of someone different from oneself.

Examples of this are of different kinds and at different levels. To give you one negative example, Scott Braithwaite did not encounter this training of the imagination. Indeed his training at BYU was conducted in deliberate opposition to all three of my goals and has more in common with Aristophanes' portrait of the old education than with the Socratic approach of the world citizen. Braithwaite, as he records, was not taught to think critically about his tradition; he was taught to internalize these teachings. In a sense, as a young Mormon in a highly international church, he was taught to interact with others from different parts of the world, but usually in the mode of prolelytizing, and never with the thought that learning might travel in both directions. Finally, as he reports, his education did not invite his fellow students to imagine or know someone like him—and did not invite him to know himself. He argues that this failure of knowledge entails a failure in the kind of love his own religion asks all people to have for one another.

Intelligent citizenship means more than these three abilities. Scientific understanding, economic understanding, and many other things are of great importance. I focus on parts of liberal education that have by now been associated with the humanities, parts that are often derided as useless for—and even subversive of—citizenship. Our argument has been that these areas, as they are currently being reformed, are crucial to the development of a truly deliberative democracy, and that they will only develop adequately if citizens if they are pursued in the spirit of Socratic self-examination and Socratic self-cultivation.

Our campuses educate our citizens. This means learning a lot of facts and mastering techniques of reasoning, but it means something more. It means learning how to be a human capable of love and imagination. Think of Charles Dickens's image of his citizen in A Christmas Carol, in his portrait of the ghost of Jacob Marley, who visits Scrooge to warn him of the dangers of a blunted imagination. In life his imagination never ventured outside the walls of his successful business to encounter the lives of the men and women around him, of different social class and background. Scrooge is asked at the spectacle of his old friend wearing an immense chain, "I wear the chain I forged in life," he tells Scrooge. "I made it link by link. I paid it out of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it." Scrooge in terror blurts out, "You were always a good man of business, Jacob."

"Business," the ghost dolefully intones. "Mankind was my business. Charity, mercy, benevolence were all my business." Here, in Dickens's own Christian way, he alludes to Christian ideas of cultivated humanity. Scrooge, as we know, got another chance to learn what the world around him contained, a belief in liberal education.

We need citizens who have this education, learned when they're still quite young, before their imagination is shackled by the weight of daily duties and self-interested money-making schemes. We produce all too many citizens whose imaginations never step out of the counting house. But we have the opportunity to do better, producing Socratic citizens, capable of thinking for themselves, arguing with their traditions, and understanding with sympathy the constraints of lives different from their own.

That, I think, is not political correctness. That is the cultivation of humanity.

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