

*Critical Consciousness and
Liberal Education*

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THE DEBATE OVER THE content of a liberal education and the so-called “canon” of books with which students should be familiar frequently resembles a Swiftian “Battle of the Books.” On one side we have the “dead white European males,” those aged shock-troops of cultural and racial hegemony; on the other the riotous variety of the multicultural “oppressed,” the “relevant” writers who allegedly represent those constituencies long excluded on the basis of race, sex, and sexual orientation. But pitting one “canon” against the other obscures the genuine good a liberal education should deliver to its students: not merely exposure to one set of names and works rather than another, but a particular way of looking at the world. I’d like to talk about this habit of thought by focussing on the originators of the West, those whom Bernard Knox has called “the oldest dead white European males,” the ancient Greeks.

When asked to define the achievement of the Greeks we usually list the intellectual, artistic, and political equipment we have inherited from them: philosophy, history, logic, physics, criticism, rhetoric, dialectic, dialogue, tragedy, comedy, epic, lyric, aesthetics, analysis, democracy—these are all Greek words. Taken together they constitute the cultural and mental framework of Western civilization, and the works embodying these “categories and concepts” once formed the content of a liberal education. Yet such a list perhaps obscures a more interesting question: What is it in Greek culture that provides the common denominator of all these words?

The answer is that they are all the formalized expressions of the essence of the Greek achievement: critical consciousness. This is the impulse and willingness to stand back from humanity and nature, to

make them objects of thought and criticism, and to search for their meaning and significance—“to see life steadily, and see it whole,” as Matthew Arnold put it, instead of remaining enslaved to custom, tradition, superstition, nature, or the brute force of political or priestly elites.

The impulse to critical consciousness has long been recognized as setting the Greeks apart from the other civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean. The Greeks, the nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt said, “seem original, spontaneous and conscious, in circumstances in which all others were ruled by a more or less mindless necessity.”¹ What distinguished the Greeks from their Mediterranean neighbors, then, was not so much how they lived, but how they *thought* about how they lived, and how they gave formal expression to this thinking.

Thus while all ancient societies kept slaves and viewed slavery as a natural, unexceptional practice, only the Greeks made slavery an object of thought. This thinking could lead to a theoretical justification of slavery, as in Aristotle’s view of the “natural” slave, the person who by a deficiency of rational self-control could be justly controlled by another.² But thinking critically about slavery could also lead to questioning the justice of such an institution, as the early fourth century BC rhetorician Alcidas did when he said, “The god gave freedom to all men, and nature created no one a slave.”³

Or consider war. All ancient peoples made war on their neighbors, competing violently for territory and wealth and honor. So too the Greeks. But to an extent unthinkable for any other ancient people, they thought and wrote about war analytically, so to speak, pondering its meaning and consequences, its complexities and horrors. Nowhere else in the ancient world can one find a work of literature like Aeschylus’s *Persians*, about the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC, when the mighty Persian invading armada was destroyed by the coalition of Greek city-states. Performed a mere eight years later in the very city, Athens, burned by the invaders, before an audience of veterans and those who had lost friends and family, the play sympathetically depicts the effects of the defeat on the Persians.

Not only could the Greeks be generous to an enemy, but they could examine critically their own behavior during wartime. During the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, Euripides produced plays that sympathetically portrayed the disastrous effects of Athenian policies, and laid bare the suffering, moral corruption, and dehumanizing passions unleashed by war. A mere nine months after the Athe-

nians massacred the males of the Greek island Melos, once their ally, and enslaved the women and children, Euripides staged *The Trojan Women* (415 BC). In that play he used the brutal aftermath of the mythic Trojan War and the suffering of the surviving women to comment on recent Athenian behavior. The princess Cassandra movingly describes the price of war—the sons never returning home, the children left orphaned, the wives bereft of protection and support—and with bitter irony finishes, “For such success as this congratulate the Greeks.”⁴ How could any Athenian in the audience not think of the Melian wives and children they had sold into slavery less than a year earlier?

These generous and self-critical attitudes are a dividend of critical consciousness, the ability to step back from the passions and prejudices of the moment and look at events from a larger perspective that illuminates the common human condition, the way even an enemy suffers and grieves just as we do.

As the Greek examination of war and slavery shows, critical consciousness can lead to the improvement and reform of human institutions and behavior, for once the mind is liberated from the authority of tradition or the supernatural, it can criticize the ways things are done and consider alternatives. In addition, the evidence of experience can then take on a greater importance, trumping the petrified dogmas sanctioned by mere authority or even sheer mental inertia, and so foster a scientific rather than a supernatural view of nature.

Indeed, the Greeks were conscious of this clash between superstition and experience, and recognized that two very different ways of understanding the world were in conflict. Plutarch in his biography of Pericles, the fifth century BC Athenian statesman, reports an incident that illustrates this struggle between traditional superstition and empirical reasoning. When a one-horned ram was born on Pericles’s estate, the soothsayer interpreted the unusual phenomenon as a sign from the gods that signified future events in Pericles’ life. But the philosopher Anaxagoras dissected the skull and showed how the deformation had been caused naturally.⁵

This conflict between traditional religious explanations and the rationalism of the new philosophy turns up everywhere in the literature of the later fifth century, and the Greeks’ recognition of this struggle is itself an example of their critical self-consciousness. Consider, for example, Euripides’ *Bacchae* (405 BC). In the play the young ruler Pentheus resents the social disorder caused by the ecstatic worship of the god of the irrational, Dionysus. The god ultimately destroys Pentheus after the king’s futile attempts at controlling Dionysus and

his worshipers fail miserably. Early in the play the conflict of traditional religious wisdom and the “new philosophy” is expressed by the old priest Teiresias: “We are the heirs of customs and traditions / hallowed by age and handed down to us / by our fathers. No quibbling logic can topple *them*, / whatever subtleties this clever age invents.”⁶ This same resentment of the new rationalism’s tendency to erode the wisdom of custom and religion partly accounts for the execution of Socrates, who was unfairly tarred with the brush of a destructive sophistic cleverness.

This new way of looking at the world, however, was creative as well as being destructive of the old ways. The most obvious example of the improving power of critical consciousness when systematized into an empirical science can be found in ancient Greek medicine. Numerous medical writings from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia survive, but their detailed empirical observations are subordinated to superstition: they are, as historian of medicine Roy Porter puts it, “sorcery systematized.”⁷ The Greek medical writers, on the other hand, for the most part ignored supernatural explanations and focused instead on their own observations and the consistent patterns of nature. That’s why our word “physician” derives from the Greek word for nature, *phusis*. The following statement, from a Hippocratic work called *On the Sacred Disease*, a treatise on epilepsy, is unique in the ancient world outside Greece. “It [epilepsy] is not,” the author says, “in my opinion, any more divine or more sacred than other diseases, but has a natural cause, and its supposed divine origin is due to men’s inexperience, and to their wonder at its peculiar character.”⁸

Critical consciousness defines the Greek achievement, and its most obvious manifestation is that uniquely Greek invention, philosophy, which can be characterized as critical consciousness systematized. Of all the Greek philosophers, the spirit of critical consciousness is best embodied in the late fifth century BC philosopher Socrates, Plato’s mentor, who was executed by Athens in 399 BC.

Socrates’s famous method was the “dialectic,” from the Greek word that suggests both “discussion” and “analytical sorting.” The purpose of dialectic was to strip away the false knowledge and incoherent opinion that most people inherit from their societies and unthinkingly depend on to manage their lives. Although Socrates claimed to doubt that he or anyone else could acquire true knowledge about the good and the beautiful, he nonetheless believed that what he called “examination,” critical consciousness applied to questions of virtue and the good, could eliminate false knowledge and opinion. Most important,

Socrates saw this activity of rational examination and pursuit of truth and virtue as the essence of what a human being is and the highest expression of human nature. That is why he chose to die rather than to give it up: “The unexamined life,” he said in his defense speech, “is no life worth living for a human being.”

The invention of philosophy formalized the Greek penchant for critical consciousness. Such an achievement is remarkable enough. Yet true to their drive to question and criticize everything, the Greeks turned critical consciousness not just on nature and other peoples, but, as we’ve already seen in their willingness to scrutinize their own beliefs about slavery or their behavior in war, they criticized their own culture and even rationalism itself.

This impulse to self-criticism is implicit in Greek literature from the very start. The first work of literature in the West, Homer’s *Iliad* (ca. 750 BC) is at once a celebration of aristocratic heroic values and a powerful critique of them, a recognition of their destructiveness to the larger community. Homer captures this ambiguity in the figure of Achilles, whom the poet compares to the star Sirius, “whose conspicuous brightness / far outshines the stars that are numbered in the night’s darkening / . . . Orion’s dog, which is brightest / among the stars, and yet is wrought as a sign of evil.”¹⁰ Tragedy itself was a genre that dramatized the fundamental limits of human aspiration and achievement, and the weaknesses of Athenian political and cultural values. And comedy explicitly held the politicians of Athens up to critical scrutiny and moral condemnation, naming names and employing a vocabulary of invective and obscene abuse that makes our own political discourse sound like an afternoon tea in a Jane Austen novel. And Greek comedy, remember, was organized and presented by the very state whose politicians were mercilessly attacked on the public stage.

One of the best examples of ancient comedy’s willingness to examine publicly the received wisdom and orthodoxy of the audience is Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* (411 BC), about the Greek women going on a sex-strike to force their men to end the Peloponnesian War, in its twentieth year when Aristophanes produced his play. In the Greek male repertoire of misogynistic stereotypes, two of the most common were the charges that women are less capable than men at controlling themselves sexually, and that they are incapable of the sort of rational deliberation and cooperation necessary for political action. Yet by play’s end, it is the *men*, not the women, who cannot control themselves sexually, and it is the organizational and executive skills of Lysistrata that prevail over the men befuddled by desire. The stereotypes have been

turned on their heads—not in a private performance, but in a production that was part of a civic ritual financed and sanctioned by the male-dominated city.

This impulse to self-examination, however, can perhaps best be illustrated by the critical questions raised about two of the Greeks' most important inventions, rationalism and democratic freedom.

At the moment in the mid-fifth century BC when philosophy was being born and formalizing the rational pursuit of knowledge, the tragic poets were questioning the power of reason to acquire significant or even useful knowledge about the human condition. In the *Oedipus Tyrannos* (431 BC), for example, Sophocles explored the limits of rationalism and its ability to know anything significant or valuable about human identity. Oedipus is a hero of the intellect who liberates Thebes from the Sphinx by solving her famous riddle about the creature that walks on four feet in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening. The answer, of course, is a human being, a natural creature defined by a body subject to time, dependence, unforeseen change, its own passions, and ultimately death.

Yet at the same time Oedipus knows what a human being is abstractly, he does not even know his own real name or parents. He is abstractly wise and concretely ignorant. His destructive pursuit of self-knowledge horrifies us, for we know the answer to the riddle of Oedipus: for all his excellence and intelligence, he is at the same time a creature guilty of parricide and incest, the worst crimes that can be incited by the passions of sex and violence.

Oedipus and his fate suggest that reason is at best only half the story of human identity: humans are also creatures of the body and its appetites, time and change, chance and death. We live in a realm of intricate possibility and consequences no mind can ever fully know or predict. The point is not so much that reason is powerless—Oedipus, after all, does figure out the answer to the mystery of King Laius' death, and he does save the city from the plague. Rather, the larger point is that the knowledge reason discovers ultimately can not liberate us from the irrational destructiveness both in ourselves and in a world of chance and change. Sophocles seems to suggest that in the end, critical self-awareness can only reveal to us the brutal truth about the tragic and nonnegotiable limits to our aspirations and achievements.

Sophocles's younger contemporary Euripides likewise details in his tragedies the limits of reason and the destructive power of passion. Euripides was particularly skeptical of Socrates's famous contention that virtue is knowledge, that if we know the good, we will do the

good. This long-lived idea, still powerful today, implied that reason properly developed and trained can resist the forces of appetite and passion and mitigate their disorder.

In his plays Euripides created characters who are driven to violence or consumed by sexual passion, all while they are fully conscious that what they are doing is wrong. Medea, whose husband Jason plans to bring a new, younger bride into their home, plots the murder of her rival and her own children. As she agonizes over this decision, she cries, "Passion is mightier than my counsels, and this is the greatest cause of evil for mortals."¹¹ So too Phaedra, suffering from the disease of lust for her stepson Hippolytus, directly refutes Socrates when she says, "We know the good and recognize it, but we cannot accomplish it."¹² Tragic critical consciousness did not allow the claims of reason to pass unchallenged, and initiated the dialectic of philosophy and tragedy still with us today.

Like rationalism, democratic freedom is one of the signature achievements of the Greeks, a potent ideal also still vital today. Yet in Athens, the city of its birth, searching questions were raised about the ideals of freedom and egalitarianism. Critics of Athenian democracy noted that its assumption of equality codified in the equal access Athenian citizens enjoyed to the institutions and offices of the state would lead to a radical egalitarianism in which the very real differences in talent, ability, and achievement among people would be ignored. As Aristotle put it, radical egalitarianism arises "out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely equal."¹³ Plato agreed, claiming that democratic egalitarianism destroyed all distinctions based on talent, worth, and achievement, dragging everybody down to the same level until even "the horses and asses have a way of marching along with all the rights and dignities of freemen; and they will run at any body who comes in their way if he does not leave the road clear for them."¹⁴

Plato detailed further the consequences of what to him was a false claim of absolute equality, particularly the tendency for absolute freedom to deteriorate into mere licentiousness, as it must, for only in the kingdom of appetite are all truly equal. In the *Republic* Socrates asks rhetorically of democratic citizens, "Are they not free, and is not the city full of freedom and frankness—a man may say and do what he likes . . . [and] the individual is clearly able to order for himself his own life as he pleases?"¹⁵ The problem with this freedom is that not all people are virtuous or even intelligent enough to use it responsibly. Thus the

city will be full of “variety and disorder,” its citizens fickle and shallow, dominated by appetite and pleasure. Chafing at any limits to pursuing his whims and desires, Democratic Man will ignore self-control and temperance and be given over to “the freedom and libertinism of useless and unnecessary pleasures.”¹⁶

Critical consciousness is the precious inheritance the West received from the Greeks. Even during the dominance of Christian intellectual and cultural unity, this impulse to challenge and question and criticize persisted, as can be seen in the numerous theological debates and heresies throughout the Christian period, culminating in that great movement of Christian self-criticism, the Reformation. Both the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were to some degree expressions of the liberation of this critical self-consciousness from the traditional restraints of Christian dogma and fossilized custom. The Enlightenment particularly took place in what Peter Gay calls a “climate of criticism” in which philosophy was defined as “the organized habit of criticism.”¹⁷ This “climate” was, of course, a return to the human-centered, rational understanding of the world and humanity the Greeks pioneered, a critical consciousness whose ultimate goal was freedom based on a truth humans discovered and validated for themselves rather than blindly accepting from traditional superstitions and prejudices.

Since then, Western culture has been defined by critical consciousness, the willingness to examine and challenge traditional wisdom and answers in the pursuit of truth, and to stand in opposition to the political and social powers whose authority and legitimacy rest on the unexamined acceptance of received dogma. Science obviously has progressed in this fashion, but even in literature we find an impatience with tradition and a restless searching for ever greater and more finely nuanced explorations of the human condition. A whole genre, the aptly named novel, was invented partly as a vehicle for examining the fluid complexities of human psychology and social relations, a complexity ignored in the stock characters and plots of traditional romance. In this sense Western literature has been the creation of what Lionel Trilling called “opposing sel[ves],” all those dissidents who, like Socrates, are driven to examine the human condition and probe beyond the traditional answers.

If we turn to liberal education, we can see that its fundamental purpose should not be the force-feeding of ideas or values codified in some exclusionary list of Great Books. Rather, liberal education should aim for the inculcation of critical consciousness as this impulse is expressed in the best works of history, philosophy, and literature, no mat-

ter whose ideological ox is gored. Needless to say, any list of those works we care to make would resemble closely the traditional canon of Great Works, for over time the literature that survives in most cases comprises the poems and novels and plays that at some level display critical consciousness. An education centered on such works, then, will foster in students the curiosity to know what Matthew Arnold called “the best that is known and thought in the world, irrespectively of practice, politics, and everything of the kind; and to value knowledge and thought as they approach this best, without the intrusion of any other considerations whatever.”¹⁸

The spirit of liberal education thus should be, as Allan Bloom suggested, “Socratic,” a process of raising important questions and examining critically the tradition of answers, as this examination is embodied in works of enduring excellence.¹⁹ The ultimate goal will be the freedom of the mind, a freedom underwritten by a habit of critical thinking that is not satisfied with the easy or emotionally gratifying answers and the received wisdom promulgated by the various economic or political interests of society. The alternative to a liberal education of this sort will necessarily be some form of indoctrination that imprisons the mind in the shackles of ideology, race, gender, or ethnicity.

The role of liberal education in training citizens for democratic freedom is what is under siege today from many sides, for a free mind is the greatest enemy of what George Orwell called the “smelly little orthodoxies,” whether these originate on the left or the right. For us today, however, it is a tendentious multiculturalism that represents the greater threat, for it demands a reading list that validates and flatters the student’s ethnic or gender esteem and preconceived notions rather than one that challenges and compels an examination of these received ideas. Thus a multicultural education is diametrically opposed to traditional liberal education, and will not deliver to its students education’s most important goal, as defined by Cardinal Newman: “The force, the steadiness, the comprehensiveness and the versatility of intellect, the command over our own powers, the instinctive just estimate of things as they pass before us.”²⁰

I would not be true to the spirit of the Greeks, however, if I neglected to emphasize that critical consciousness has its dangers as well as boons. As Euripides recognized, not all the wisdom of tradition is necessarily false, nor is it always amenable to rational justification or accounting. Moreover, a critical examination not anchored by some level of moral and epistemic certitude can degenerate into a destructive nihilism or an intellectual paralysis. In *Hamlet* Shakespeare made

clear this connection between moral relativism and a paralyzing ratiocination, for the same Hamlet who recognizes that “thinking too precisely on the event” makes one “lose the name of action,” also asserts that “nothing’s good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” These days we see the same unholy alliance—between an aggressively critical intellectual inquisition and an epistemic and moral nihilism—in the antics of the postmoderns, who tear down not to rebuild, but merely to revel in the act of destruction.

Yet even with these reservations, one still must opt for a liberal education centered on critical consciousness, on a habit of thinking that resists unreflective acceptance of received wisdom and popular dogma. After all, most of the horrors of this century have resulted not from individual acts but from vast collectives enslaved to unexamined doctrines and ideologies that privilege the group, sect, or clan over free and independent minds. Creating such minds should be the task of liberal education, and that education itself should expose students to the great exemplars of Western critical consciousness.

NOTES

1. *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, trans. Sheila Stern, ed. Oswyn Murray (New York, 1998), 11–12.
2. *Politics* 1254a–1260a.
3. Quoted in Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge, 1996), 75.
4. *The Trojan Women*, 383, in Euripides III, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1958), 141.
5. Plutarch, *Life of Pericles*, in *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, trans. Ian Scott-Kilvert (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1960), 1706.
6. *Bacchae*, 200–203, in *Euripides V*, trans. William Arrowsmith (Chicago, 1959), 163.
7. In *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity* (New York, 1997), 46–47.
8. *On The Sacred Disease*, I, trans. W. H. S. Jones, in *Hippocrates* (Cambridge, MA and London, 1923).
9. Plato, *Apology* 38a, my translation.

10. *Iliad* 22.27–30, in *The Iliad*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1962).
11. *Medea* 1079–80, my translation.
12. *Hippolytus* 380–81, my translation.
13. *Politics* 1301a, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (Princeton, 1984), 2066.
14. *Republic* 5632c, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, in *The Dialogues of Plato*, vol. 1 (New York, 1937), 822.
15. *Republic* 557b–558c, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, 815.
16. *Republic* 560e–561c, trans. by Benjamin Jowett, 819.
17. In *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation. The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York, 1966), 130.
18. In “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” in *Selected Prose*, ed. P. J. Keating (Harmondsworth, England, 1970), 141.
19. In *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), 267.
20. *The Idea of a University*, xxiii.