**What's a Core For? Varieties of Curricular Experience**

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Suppose I were to begin today with remarks that made you, or some of you, uncomfortable. Suppose my remarks were sharp enough, on some contentious topic, that you, or some of you, were offended. Suppose that you understood them as a threat, an incitement, an implicit or, even an explicit, portent of attack. Suppose that my speech proposed that your speech be silenced.

Suppose that, being made uncomfortable, or being offended, or feeling threatened by my remarks, you proposed that I tone it down, if I wished to be allowed to continue. Or suppose that you proposed to shut me up. And suppose that your proposal was made in the name of civility, or the maintenance of the community of shared discourse, or something like that. And suppose that I insisted that my discomfiting, offensive, or threatening speech was protected by my right of freedom of speech, or by academic freedom, and that you are in the wrong in wanting to shut me up, or even in wanting me to tone it down. My tone, I might claim, is essential to the expression I need, and have every right, to make.

Stand-offs with this shape are familiar in American higher education, as they are in public life more broadly. Hardly a day passes without someone being accused of giving offense and then apologizing, or saying they didn't mean it, or accusing their accusers of hypersensitivity. Certainly the last commencement season was rife with such cases. And there is often a procataleptic dimension: someone who is invited to speak gets disinvited due to protests that his or her speech will offer discomfort, be offensive, or threaten. Job offers have been withdrawn. The continually simmering, or boiling, case of Steven Salaita at the University of Illinois has thrust all this before us vividly in recent days. It may seem ironic that some proponents of Salaita’s freedom to express himself have called for or joined a boycott of the University of Illinois, thereby diminishing the availability of speech there. The Chancellor of UC Berkeley, called for "civility" on campus, and the term was decried by some people as dog-whistle vocabulary, or code, for the exclusion of some topics or modes of discourse which they deem important to have in play.

What is so difficult about these situations is that the processes of identifying and characterizing the points of disagreement are themselves zones of disagreement. For example, suppose that I acknowledge that my speech is offensive, but hold that you have no right not to be offended, while you hold that it is in fact threatening, and you have a right not to be threatened. Not only is the boundary between offense and threat vague, a gradual transition, and not a sharp line, our different perceptions of that vagueness show that we perceive the gradation differently. When we cannot agree on how to describe what it is we disagree about, the possibility of working through to resolution of some kind--even to uneasy tolerance--seems remote. Where is there a beginning point for understanding these confused contentions?

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The philosopher G.E. Moore, whose *Principia Ethica* so influenced the Bloomsbury crowd, was a great believer in the genius of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He was so convinced that Wittgenstein was up to something very important that he attended a set of lectures in the early 1930's, despite, as he confessed in his notes, understanding very little of what Wittgenstein was saying. Moore wrote that he was "very much puzzled by the meaning" of much that Wittgenstein said, and "also as to the connection between different things which he said." He apologizes for the incoherence of his notes by appealing to the incoherence of the lectures. And yet, the notes show that Wittgenstein's work twists and turns around the very puzzles that lie at the core of our worries about the incoherence of the disputes just described .

Moore found Wittgenstein’s talk sliding from ethics to aesthetics, from criticizing Freud’s thought about primitive religion, and taking issue with J.G. Frazer, author of the once widely-read *Golden Bough*, a compendium of the world's mythologies. Wittgenstein said he wanted to talk about the grammar of the word "God," and he did talk about decisions made by Brahms in crafting his symphonies. Clearly, it was a wild ride. But the core of it, which Moore preserved, was a discussion of giving reasons in aesthetics, which he claimed were parallel to reason-giving in ethics. Moore wrote: "The question of Aesthetics, he said, was not 'Do you like this?' but 'Why do you like it?' What Aesthetics tries to do, he said, is to give reasons" for the preferences we call aesthetic judgments. This reason-giving consists of trotting out facts, "to draw your attention to a thing, to place things side by side. . . . And he said the same sort of reasons were given not only in Ethics, but also in Philosophy." (Moore, *Philosophical Papers*, 314-315)

This passage in Moore is a kernel of thought about the practice of persuasion by giving reasons. It's full of wonderful stuff that is both obvious and momentous. Reasons are the facts we place before someone who disagrees with our judgments. The other person may also disagree with the grounds of our judgments, and that in various ways, by questioning whether the alleged facts are true, whether they are strong enough to warrant the judgment, or whether they are even relevant. We see why any serious disagreement in matters of judgment becomes so tangled so quickly, and why it is hard to keep track, in any resolute attempt to think through a complicated topic, of where the argument is headed and even what it is about, regardless whether the topic is ethical, aesthetic, or about some matter of fact, when part of what is at stake is trying to figure out what counts as evidence.

In the decades since Wittgenstein lectured and Moore took and published his notes, many philosophers have contributed to the deepening of the understanding of his work. Most recently Alice Crary has been instructive in her account of the “sensitivities and propensities” that underlie the very possibility of language. (*Beyond Moral Judgment*). In what follows I am also particularly indebted to Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* (1958) and to Robert Fogelin's *Evidence and Meaning* (1967), as well as work of J.L. Austin.

People acquainted with Wittgenstein's thought are aware that he paid a lot of attention to ordinary language, that he talked about linguistic meaning in terms of the use of words, that he talked about language games, that he tried to avoid theorizing, and that, indeed, his hope was to get rid of philosophical theories in favor of a settled clarity about what sorts of things it makes sense to say and what not. Many people also are aware that his thought went through a big mid-life transition, veering away from an early insistence on finding a unified logical clarity toward an embrace of the variety and indeterminacy of life and language.

But what is often not noticed is the presence, at the core of his later work, of this struggle to see how what we know, or think we know, stands in relation to what we like and want, in a vastly complex network of contingencies--perceptions, reasons, and explanations--reflecting largely implicit forms of life, patterns of feeling, and habits of uptake and response. No wonder he had trouble not talking about everything all at once. No wonder Moore got lost. No wonder he seems obscure.

Wittgenstein wrote in *Philosophical Investigations*, #242: "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. -- It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call 'measuring' is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement."

Wittgenstein's later work, compared with say, the *Tractatus*, seems less structured but no less gnomic in character. This passage, from the depths of *Philosophical Investigations*, occurs in the course of a discussion of what it is to follow a rule. Since all rational proceedings are, presumably by definition, cases of rule following, what is under examination here could hardly be more central to the project of trying to understand what it is for a proceeding to be rational. And the claims made show, on examination, a fascinating progression.

It might seem commonplace to admit that "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement in definitions." For, if we mean different things by the words by use, neither of us will understand what the other says. But Wittgenstein adds to this the idea--acknowledging that it will sound odd--that "If language is to be a means of communication there must also be agreement in judgments." What does that mean? Why would it, as he notes, "seem to abolish logic"? And how would it "not do so?"

Logic as traditionally conceived, is the stable ground of meanings created by the relationships among the definitions we have accepted. It precedes judgments about what is true or false, delineating the possible meanings of claims, meanings that are necessarily prior to judgments whether such claims are true or false. Logic qualifies meaningful claims to be so judged, and disqualifies the meaningless. This is the world of the *Tractatus*, in which a wholly *a priori* logic "takes care of itself," allowing us confidently to sweep away the *sinnlos*, *das Unsinn*, and even *das Widersinn*, leaving a language capable only of depicting possible facts whose realization may be detected in a sharply structured world of "all that is the case." Logic deals with what is possible; you have to look at the world to see which among the logically possible states exist, and thus what claims are true and false.

But if people have to agree on judgments they make, about what is true and false, before we know what makes sense and what doesn't make sense to say, then the building blocks of rationality--the difference between reason and chaos--depend on something that is itself contingent: agreement among human beings in the judgments they make. That seems to destroy logic, or abolish it, because then logic's structures are no longer *a priori*, no longer settled in advance. They float, so to speak, in the uncertainties of human agreement--or sink in the possibilities of *dis*agreement.

Wittgenstein's verb translated "abolish," is "*aufheben*," a word brimming with Hegelian connotations, but also a very ordinary word, sometimes meaning what we mean in English by "pick up," as in picking something up off the floor. So one plausible sense is that if language being a means of communication depends on agreement in judgments, that "picks up," or "scoops up," logic, taking it off its stable resting place.

But he immediately says it doesn't. Maybe he's having a joke possible in German though obscure in English, based on *aufheben*'s contradictory meanings: to abolish or to take up, even to place in transcendence. (You see the Hegel here.) What he writes is "*Dies scheint die Logik aufzuheben; hebt sie aber nicht auf*." "Logic isn't scooped up," to paraphrase.

Why not? Well, Wittgenstein again invokes the difference between setting the rules and playing the game: "It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement." And then comes the appeal to whatever stability we get: "But what we call 'measuring' is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement." That is, unless we agreed on the results we get, time after time, in the vast majority of cases of measuring something, there wouldn't be any such thing as measuring. But we do, and there is.

And that fact rests on agreement about such things as how to hold the ruler, how to look at it, and what sort of call to make based on how the ruler aligns with the object under measurement. (You can supply the details, if you like, from learning to use a mass spectrometer.) The point is that learning measurement is learning to do something, and when you learn to do something you join a community of those who agree about how this thing is done. Wittgenstein puts it like this a few entries earlier (PI 224): "The word 'agreement' and the word 'rule' are *related* to one another, they are cousins. If I teach anyone the use of the one word, he learns the use of the other with it." That we are able to apply rules at all--that is to say, that we are able to deal rationally, to tell a difference between rational and irrational proceedings--rests on a vast substratum of largely implicit agreement about how to do things.

The temptation at this point is to ask where that agreement comes from, what it is grounded on. There seem to be four strands in Wittgenstein's thought on this question, and I will simply enumerate them before deferring that temptation till it has a richer object of desire. One kind of answer seems a form of naturalism: Humans just are so standardly constructed that we are in general and within a certain range, able to make out equivalences among medium-sized objects. We can count pretty much forever, and are not stymied at three, like crows. Another kind of answer seems to be an appeal to acculturation. The Chinese or some of them anyway agree that thousand-year-old eggs are delectable; most non-Chinese, not so much. Another kind of answer seems to be an appeal to explicit training that inducts us into a group engaged in some practice. If you want to do modern science, you have to grant that the meter and the second just *are* what scientists have agreed that they shall be, as measured in ways that scientists can be taught. And sometimes there is an insistence that agreement is just unaccountable, groundless, arbitrary. Wittgenstein wrote in late notes: "What is so difficult," he writes, "is the groundlessness of our believing" (*On Certainty* 166).

So there's a naturalist strand, a cultural relativist strand, a stipulativist strand, and a strand that seems to say "It is what it is." I'm certain that we ought not to expect to be able to find a general answer to the question which of these appeals counts for how much as Wittgenstein sees things, or which counts for how much in actual fact. But I do think they give us some useful analytic tools as we think about the borderlands of agreement and disagreement in some actual cases. We can also take away from Wittgenstein this thought: It will make a great deal of difference, when we grapple with actual hard cases, how much of the bases of the agreements that undergird logic and reason itself we hope or expect to find in human nature, how much in the vagaries of cultural difference, how much in differing stipulations, and how much we despair ever to grasp. Think how different it is to say of someone else that he is inhuman, or that he is a savage, or that he has just not thought things through yet, or that we can make no sense of how he could think and act as he does.

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Not so long ago most people lived in insular communities sharing the vast bulk of their life experience and also sharing the common practices that supported the meanings of the terms in which they described their lives and negotiated such differences as would, of course, arise among them. Canonical stories and texts--the equivalent of core curricula in such cultures--would amount to training manuals, sources for the iconic, paradigmatic cases, the exemplars of honor and dishonor, right and wrong. Need an example of a wicked king? Consider Ahab. Need an example of a wise and just king? Consider Solomon. Need a story that poses moral complexity without challenging accepted norms? Consider David.

It is tempting to suppose that in such a context the chief function of canon is transmissive. The job is to pass on to future generations the understanding offered by, and the culture imbedded in, the models of the past. And certainly that has been a dominant theme even quite recently in curricular disputes. I am reminded of a text I received in the mail years ago from a publisher, an unrequested examination copy. It was a fairly standard compendium of texts in the tradition that runs from the Greeks to the Enlightenment. Its title: “Enduring Western Civilization.” Surely they meant the adjectival participle to suggest that Western civilization endures. But I read a gerund noun phrase, as in “Enduring Western civilization takes great restraint.”

But rare would be the culture so immune even to internal reflection that a purely transmissive model is adequate. As Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, a tradition is partly constituted by a continual disputation concerning its own nature. In *After Virtue* (p. 206) he wrote: "When a tradition is in good working order, it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives that tradition its particular point and purpose." And, "Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict."

Conflict within a tradition should, in the hope of maintaining vitality, range across three dimensions of contention: First, what are the constituent texts or other works engagement with which constitutes participation in the tradition? Second, what are the categories of analysis to be deployed in appropriating those works? Third, what are the lessons to be learned in the appropriation? And all these questions pose the one beyond them all: who gets to say? There is, in these matters, no court of appeal beyond the one Wittgenstein describes as governing rule-following. At some point, people agree. Or they don’t. Reasons come to an end. As in the punch line of the old joke, “The people in this church believe that Pharoah’s daughter found Moses in the bulrushes. At that church, they believe that Pharoah’s daughter said she found Moses in the bulrushes.”

A religious core can explore conflict in judgment as well as a secular core. Consider, for example, the story, mostly in Samuel I, but continuing into Samuel II, of Saul, David, and Jonathan. The story is roughly sketched. There is a lot of abruptness, and a kind of abruptness that makes Macbeth seem really talky by comparison. Spears are thrown, loves declared, pacts undertaken, betrayals made, and a deceased prophet is annoyed at being brought up from the grave to ply his trade, while a witch is made to fear for her life for plying hers. There are ambiguities. Are David and Jonathan lovers? Does it matter? How is David not simply, at best, a petty warlord, and, at worst, the ruthless, unprincipled chieftain of a gang of thugs?

There's a lot of opportunity here for questions about different uptakes on shared facts, about who, despite the spare narrative skein, is taking what facts and warranting what conclusions, and who is taking the same range of facts as the basis for a different conclusion, and ample range for exploring the really big questions: Why do people do what they do? What do they understand themselves to be doing? These questions, in a world characterized by different people and groups of people understanding the same things in different, often opposite, ways, are the questions a core, religious or secular, ought to prepare students to engage.

We live in a world characterized by the seemingly constant confrontation of different and contradictory accounts of what is right and wrong, honorable and dishonorable, praiseworthy and wicked. And by constant contention whether any of these categories of analysis has any validity. This fact--diversity of discourse on moral meaning that threatens to go all the way down--is the big inescapable fact of the contemporary world. "All the way down," by the way, is chaos, mutual incomprehension, babble on all sides.

In a context of diversity, global contact, and competing versions of central moral and epistemic concepts, the function of a core curriculum must be more complex. That function must proceed from the presumption that one of its key goals is to equip students with the ability to cope with difference and conflict.

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Diversity is **the** central issue. It is simply an inescapable fact of the world we live in that people disagree not only in definitions, and not only in what facts are the case, but also--and often in troubling ways--in the judgments they make about the relevance of admitted facts to conclusions about what is right and wrong, what ought to be done, in other words about the meaning and importance of the facts. People differ in the fundamental uptake on things, the uptake that is rooted partially in elements of human nature, partially in different acculturation, partially in having been trained into different particular communities of practice, and God knows where else. Differences in uptake amount to disagreement in values. That’s where we can still be at loggerheads after we have agreed on what the facts are.

Every significant human dispute ranges from “What are the facts?” to “How do you know?” to “How do you take those facts as relevant and meaningful, and why?” to “What counts strongly or weakly, and why?” and sometimes to “You take things as you do because of your race, class, religion, gender, and so on.” We see in every account of the benefits of education in the liberal arts and sciences, something about the importance of the development of powers of critical thinking. Certainly, even in the narrowest sense, critical thinking is an important ability. Analysis of arguments, evaluation of evidence, command of the principles of logic, argumentation, and rhetoric themselves, are all important outcome abilities. But the best and toughest work comes when disagreement arrives at the point where what one party admits as decisive evidence for some momentous conclusion, the other party deems insufficient, or even irrelevant. That's the point we come up against when we can't see how people apparently as fully human as we are could possibly accept the reasons they do for the conclusions they reach. This is the point where logic gives way to something very much like aesthetics.

This is also the point where carrying forward the effort to understand others--no, even more the effort to understand ourselves--demands large capacities of sympathetic imagination. You have to be able to see how the other person could "take" the facts as warranting the conclusion she reaches. You have to be able to get some critical distance on the fact that you yourself are perhaps "taking" some things as reasons that others find outlandish or beside the point. Socrates said that the whole game was about the maxim, "Know thyself." To do that takes more than critical acuity, more than analysis, more than cleverness. It takes imagination, and sympathy. It takes an admission that knowing oneself requires an earnest, laborious comparison and contrast with other ways of thinking and being. It requires intentional cultivation of a range of sensibilities acquiring, most likely, in deliberative engagement with texts that offer tough cases. The question is, under what conditions can the skills of deliberation be cultivated?

Core curricula, in the contemporary world, should prepare students not only to approach critically the exemplars of their own traditions, but also, to the extent practical, to approach with sympathetic imagination the exemplars of conflicting ones. The test of the content and conduct of a core curriculum is this question: How well do they prepare the student to deal with conflict in judgment? This question contains several others. Do the content and conduct of the core help the student to recognize diversity and conflict? Do they help the student to sort, analytically and critically, the constituent elements of disagreements in judgment? Do they help the student to enter, to the extent possible, imaginatively and sympathetically, into the world views of different, disputing parties? Do they help the student understand and evade the seductive false alternatives that lie, on the one hand, of assuming that some favored pattern of uptake is alone natural, divinely ordained, or in some other way conclusively and objectively right, and on the other of concluding that all such differences are incommensurable, none better or worse than any other, and resolvable, if at all, only by force.

Only if they achieve that capacity of entering into reflection can they be reckoned capable of deliberation, and only then can there be any hope of common purpose in resolving such differences.

I am not saying that we succeed, even in trying to deliberate, very much. I am not saying we are naturally disposed toward it. I am not saying we are very good at it, or that it necessarily succeeds or even succeeds very often. I am not saying that the effort will elicit a reciprocal generosity of spirit. It may or it may simply get us duped and cheated. I am saying that if we have an obligation to avoid violence, we have an obligation to cultivate and exercise the skills of deliberation. And hat means there is an obligation to provide and protect the contexts within which alone deliberation can be learned and practiced.

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Phi Beta Kappa is committed to freedom of speech as an essential precondition of the pursuit of the studies we value. “Freedom,” other things being equal, means more speech, not less. It means tempering threats that inhibit or chill freedom. But it also means protecting certain social and institutional spaces in which freedom of speech can flourish for ther sake of encouraging deliberation. Some speech degrades that space; some speech threatens to destroy it. Protecting the freedom of speech means not tolerating speech that actively threatens or proposes to silence other speech.

Now, pursuit of truth is a social process that occurs in widely varying contexts, even if we restrict our view to the college or university campus. There are formal occasions when the institution expresses its official positions. There are protests, demonstrations, and arguments on the sidewalks and in the streets. There are committee meetings. There are classrooms, lectures, seminars. There are visiting speakers. A campus provides a rich and deeply various set of social spaces to which those who would exchange their views bring different sets of expectations.

People who seek a universal norm of civility are thinking paradigmatically, perhaps, of a conversation in classroom, or a committee meeting, and not so much of a public demonstration or a tweet. Those who, like the American Historical Association’s letter to the Chancellor of the University of Illinois, warn that a policy of civility will chill and inhibit the expression of opinion, are thinking paradigmatically, perhaps, of protecting speech that will challenge authority, and not so much of protecting space in which deliberation can emerge.

Martha Nussbaum has done perhaps as much as anyone to show how the cultivation of sympathetic imagination, and the deliberative approach it engenders, lies at the heart of liberal education. Deliberation is weighing reasons, comparing the force of different evidence, noting the patterns of uptake we have, and others have, that give reasons their relevance. Genuine deliberation, because it requires mutuality in self-disclosure, and because it involves discovering yourself as well as discovering the other, is a delicate business that works well only in a context of trust and restraint. The merit that lies in advocacy of civility is this: an institution devoted to the liberal arts and sciences must be devoted to the maintenance and protection of social spaces where deliberation can occur, where it is positively encouraged. But it need not insist that all social spaces be deliberative in character, or that all speech be civil. It depends on what is being said by whom where to whom and for what purpose, as well as how. Just as on the one hand an institution, by requiring all civility all the time can chill freedom, so the failure to protect some social zones as conducive to deliberation can forfeit its commitment to the pursuit of truth.

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