

Undoing the dis-education of Millennials

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I teach in a law school. For several years now my students have been mostly Millennials. Contrary to stereotype, I have found that the vast majority of them want to learn. But, true to stereotype, I increasingly find that most of them cannot think, don't know very much, and are enslaved to their appetites and feelings. Their minds are held hostage in a prison fashioned by elite culture and their undergraduate professors.

They cannot learn until their minds are freed from that prison. This year in my Foundations of Law course for first-year law students, I found my students especially impervious to the ancient wisdom of foundational texts, such as Plato's *Crito* and the Code of Hammurabi. Many of them were quick to dismiss

unfamiliar ideas as "classist" and "racist", and thus unable to engage with those ideas on the merits. So, a couple of weeks into the semester, I decided to lay down some ground rules. I gave them these rules just before beginning our annual unit on legal reasoning.

Before I can teach you how to reason, I must first teach you how to rid yourself of unreason. For many of you have not yet been educated. You have been dis-educated. To put it bluntly, you have been indoctrinated. Before you learn how to think you must first learn how to stop unthinking.

Reasoning requires you to understand truth claims, even truth claims that you think are false or bad or just icky. Most of you have been taught to label things with various "isms", which prevents you from understanding claims you find uncomfortable or difficult.

Reasoning requires correct judgement. Judgement involves making distinctions, discriminating. Most of you have been taught how to avoid critical, evaluative judgements by appealing to simplistic terms such as "diversity" and "equality".

Reasoning requires you to understand the difference between true and false. And reasoning requires coherence and logic. Most of you have been taught to embrace incoherence and illogic. You have learned to associate truth with your subjective feelings, which are neither true nor false but only yours, and which are constantly changeable.

FIRST LESSON in CULTIVATION WEEDING

We will have to pull out all of the weeds in your mind as we come across them. Unfortunately, your mind is full of weeds, and this will be a very painful experience. But it is strictly necessary if anything useful, good, and fruitful is to be planted in your head.

There is no formula for this. Each of you has

different weeds, and so we will need to take this on the case-by-case basis. But there are a few weeds that infect nearly all of your brains. So I am going to pull them out now.

FIRST, except when describing an ideology, you are not to use a word that ends in "ism". Communism, socialism, Nazism, and capitalism are established concepts in history and the social sciences, and those terms can often be used fruitfully to gain knowledge and promote understanding. "Classism", "sexism", "cisgenderism", and (yes) even racism are generally not used as meaningful or productive terms, at least you have been taught to use them. Most of the time, they do not promote understanding.

'ISMS OBSTRUCT LEARNING

In fact, "isms" prevent you from learning. You have been taught to slap an "ism" on things that you do not understand, or that make you feel uncomfortable because you do not understand them. But slapping a label on the box without first opening the box and examining its contents is a form of cheating. Worse, it prevents you from discovering the treasures hidden in the box. For example, we discussed the Code of Hammurabi, some of you want to slap labels on what you read, which enabled you to convince yourself that you had nothing to learn from ancient Babylon. But when we peeled off the labels and looked inside the box, we discovered several surprising truths. In fact, we discovered that Hammurabi still has a lot to teach us today.

One of the falsehoods that has been stuffed into your brains and pounded into place is that moral knowledge progresses inevitably, such that later generations are morally and intellectually superior to earlier generations, and that the older the source the more morally suspect that source is. There is a term for that. It is called chronological snobbery. Or, to use a term that you might understand more easily, "ageism".

SECOND, you have been taught two moral values above all others: diversity and equality.

These are important values when properly understood. But the way most of you have been taught to understand them makes you irrational, unreasoning. For you have been taught that we must have as much diversity as possible and that equality means that everyone must be made equal. But equal simply means the same. To say that 2 + 2 equals 4 is to say that 2 +2 is numerically the same as four. And diversity simply means difference. So when you say that we have diversity and equality, you are saying we should have difference and sameness. That is incoherent, by itself. Two things cannot be different and the same at the same time in the same way.

Furthermore, diversity and equality are not the most important values. In fact, neither diversity nor

equality is valuable at all in its own right. Some diversity is bad. For example, if slavery is inherently wrong, as I suspect we all think it is, then a diversity of views about the morality of slavery is worse than complete agreement that slavery is wrong.

Similarly, **equality** is not to be desired for its own sake. Nobody is equal in all respects. We are all different, which is to say that we are not all the same, which is to say that we are unequal in many ways. And that generally is a good thing. But it is not always a good thing (see the remarks about diversity).

Related to this: You do not know what the word "fair" means. It does not just mean "equality". Nor does it mean something you do not like. For now, you will have to take my word for this. But we will examine fairness from time to time throughout this semester.

THIRD, you should not bother to tell us how you feel about a topic. Tell us what you think about it. **If you can't think yet**, that's O.K. Tell what Aristotle thinks, or what H.L.A. Hart thinks. Borrow opinions from those whose opinions are worth considering. As Aristotle teaches us in the reading for today, men and women who are enslaved to the passions, who never rise above their animal natures by practising the virtues, do not have worthwhile opinions. Only the person who exercises practical reason and attains practical wisdom knows how, first, to live his life, then, to order his household, and, finally, when he is sufficiently wise and mature, to venture opinions on how to bring order to the political community.

One of my goals for you this semester is that each of you will encounter at least one idea that you find disagreeable and that you will achieve genuine disagreement with that idea. I need to explain what I mean by that because many of you have never been taught how to disagree.

Disagreement is not expressing one's disapproval of something or expressing that something makes you feel bad or icky. To really disagree with someone's idea or opinion, you must first understand that idea or opinion. When Socrates tells you that a good life is better than life in exile, you can neither agree nor disagree with that claim without first understanding what he means by "good life" and why he thinks running away from Athens would be unjust.

Similarly, if someone expresses a view about abortion, and you do not first take the time to understand what the view is and why the person thinks the view true, then you cannot disagree with the view, much less reason with that person. You might take offense. You might feel bad that someone holds that view. But you are not reasoning unless you are engaging the merits of the argument just as Socrates engaged with Crito's argument that he should flee from Athens.

Ground rules

So here are three ground rules for the rest of the semester.

1. The only "ism" I ever want to come out

your mouth is a syllogism. If I catch you using an "ism" or its analogous "ist" — racist, classist, etc — then you will not be permitted to continue speaking until you have first identified which "ism" you are guilty of at that very moment. You are not allowed to fault others for being biased or privileged until you have first identified and examined your own biases and privileges.

2. If I catch you this semester using the words "fair," "diversity" or "equality", or a variation on those terms and you not stop immediately to explain what you mean, you will lose your privilege to express any further opinions in class until you first demonstrate that you understand three things about that the view you are criticizing.

3. If you ever begin a statement with the words "I feel" before continuing you must cluck like a chicken or make some suitable animal sound.

To their credit, the students received the speech well. And so far this semester, only two students have been required to cluck like a chicken.

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EDITORIAL COMMENT

St Pius X, in *Pascendi* in 1907, said the sources of Modernism in Christian doctrine are pride and ignorance.

The malformation, or dis-education as Macleod prefers to call it, of his university students, is the outcome of pretentiousness developing into intellectual pride and of vast ignorance imposed by a mental foundation of false principles imprisoning their minds in "custodial sentences" such as life imprisonment in jails or committal to asylums for the insane.

Some replace thought with labels, and have been taught to do so, either deliberately or unwittingly. It's the duped mutants and the change agents — see *Handouts* n. 145.

And they specialize in slippery words like "diversity", "equality", "fairness", "liberty", "freedom", "my rights" (but never "my duties"), and, if they are churchmen, "pastoral" and "divisiveness".

He also told them a parable:

Can a blind man lead a blind man?

Will they not both fall into a pit?

A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher.

Luke 6:39-40

Or they shout slogans, either those slippery words also held aloft on banners like the bronze serpent in the wilderness, or chantable catchy-phrases or sentences like "We want..." all the way through to "Crucify him!"

All these are evasions of reason and responsibility. We must re-establish those 7 Rs: Religion, Respect, Reason, Responsibility, as well as good old Reading, 'Riting and 'Rithmetic.

Father James Tierney