

A Radical Criticism of the Platonic Foundations of Liberal Education (or, "The soul wants what it wants")

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I had the good fortune of being able to spend the academic year, 1980-81, as a Lilly Endowment Fellow reading uninterruptedly in the areas of philosophy, science, and theology. Much of that reading did not connect *directly* with issues in liberal education, but all of it connected *indirectly*, and I mention it here because, first, issues in liberal education formed the principal thread of unity by which I tied together the texts from different fields, and, second, because it was in this period of reading and thinking that some hitherto vague but increasingly persistent intuitions about liberal education finally came into focus for me. What follows is my attempt to give these newly focused intuitions the form of argument.

I

The first point I wish to make is that those of us interested in the enhancement and survival of liberal education are often our own weakest advocates and defenders. This statement is intended not to derogate anyone's practices in particular, but merely to describe affairs in general. At professional conferences, cocktail parties, and other watering holes for our species, when we are surrounded by colleagues who know how to utter the proper supportive noises for frightened or wounded members of the herd, we in liberal education find not only encouragement and sympathy, but find ourselves sounding aggressive and persuasive about our projects and goals. Back at home, however, isolated from our kind and harried by critics, we begin either to stammer and stutter, looking guilty and feeling defensive, or we launch piously into panic-stricken rhetoric about the barbarian hordes. At these times, crucial to us politically, we too frequently fail either to describe clearly or to defend persuasively the kind of education to which we are most committed. I think that this failure derives, in turn, from a prior failure to turn upon the issues in liberal edu-

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cation the white searchlight of radical criticism. By radical criticism I do not mean criticism that is either shrill, dogmatic, or pugilistic. Knock-outs and loyalty oaths do not constitute criticism, radical or otherwise. What I mean by radical criticism, as opposed to some other kind, is that kind of analysis that penetrates through superficialities and goes straight to the *radix*, the Latin word for root, from which *radical* (and, incidentally, *radish*) derive.

Root issues are usually connected with whatever deep assumptions underlie our conduct, but a common feature of assumptions is that, like sensitive teeth, they can make the whole body flinch when they are tapped on or probed into. We don't like others forcing us into the examination chair, and self-examination that really digs around near the nerve endings is something we hardly ever do voluntarily. Instead of submitting liberal education to radical criticism, instead of attempting to say clearly what we are up to and why we are up to it, we tend too often to substitute cliches for radical criticism. *We* make people well-rounded (whatever that means), we say, while vocational education merely makes them employable. *We* defend values, we say, while our non-liberal counterparts lapse into prejudice. Such assertions are feeble. They are not defenses; they are merely defensive. Like the foolish fellow who, in the old parable, sees no reason to fix the hole in his roof when the sun is shining, we tend to ignore the necessity of doing radical criticism when our programs and budgets are brimming with students and money (as they were ten or fifteen years ago), and, like the same fellow who avoids fixing his roof when it is raining because he doesn't want to get wet, we tend to avoid radical criticism when we are under attack because we instinctively fear that, if we expose the soft underbelly of our assumptions at the very moment of attack, we may suffer wounds from which there is no recovery.

To continue the metaphor from the parable, we in liberal education find ourselves at the present moment in history not just in a rain storm, but in a cloudburst. The movement toward professionalization of the curriculum makes liberal arts programs seem increasingly irrelevant; economic pressures erode the budgetary turf, which in better times had been marked off for liberal education programs that are now being called luxuries; and the simplistic "back to basics" movement, concerned mainly with i-t-s and i-t-apostrophe-s, implies that liberal education is peripheral, probably elitist, and maybe even perniciously obstructive to the goal of snagging the degree that will, in turn, snag the job.

Detractors of liberal education do not usually label themselves as detractors, of course, but parade under euphemistic banners that say, "We love liberal education, but we have to be practical. Survival is the issue." This is seldom, of course, literally true. What is practical or not practical is not so much a matter of whether we survive, but a matter of the character

and conditions of our survival. To the inevitable enfeeblement of our defenses for liberal education, we have picked up the hue and cry of practicality like hounds on a scent, and we have set about trying to prove that yes, by golly, we really are as practical in our own way as computers and crescent wrenches. Isn't it surprising, we innocently say, that we hadn't noticed that fact before. English departments all but abandon literature and take up the teaching of writing, not because writing is the main strategy that civilization has devised for preserving its wisdom and achievements, but because (we are proud to argue) plant managers and insurance salesmen have to write memos on the job. Introductory science courses are no longer taught from a liberal arts perspective (if they ever were), but are, instead, illegitimately used as a leg-up for science majors who need specialized knowledge to pave their way into medical school or industry. Foreign language departments don't defend languages as the bridges into culture and thought; they "sell" languages, instead, because they are useful in business, politics, or international relations.

This is not an attack on the validity of these arguments. Liberal arts training *is* useful. Even Bell Telephone has written a booklet saying so and showing the number of management positions the company has given to liberal arts graduates. My claim is not that these arguments are invalid, but that they are, at best, peripheral to the arguments we should be making, and that if we continue relying ever more heavily on *practical* arguments for our existence and our worth, then we will eventually discover that we have nothing left in our possession worth defending.

Right when we are under attack, moreover, is when we ought to be most clear about what it is that makes our contribution to education both distinctive and justifiable. That we are frequently criticized for not being practical does not mean that we have to defend ourselves in those terms. To use the gun that others already have aimed at our heads is suicide. Picking up and using whatever arguments are most current either in education specifically or in society generally is not our business. *Criticizing* those arguments *is* our business. But criticism must, like other enduring and salutary virtues, begin at home, and saying this brings me back to the main point of the first part of my argument, namely, that radical self-criticism should always be an important component of what we in liberal education do, and that it should become especially important when we find ourselves cramped for curricular space and in possession of fewer friends than we used to have. It is the only way we can save ourselves because it is the only way we can continue to know ourselves.

II

In the second part of my argument, to which I now turn, I shall attempt to practice what I preach by turning to examine an issue of impor-

tance in liberal education: the problem of the relationship between education and moral improvement, or, to put the issue in its ancient form, the problem of the relationship between knowledge and virtue. Despite the high-quality attention this problem has received at the hands of thinkers such as Plato and Cardinal Newman, the issue is still alive, for Plato and Newman gave answers to this problem that are fundamentally opposed, and the resolution of their positions—if indeed there is one—still awaits us. Even had it not received scrutiny by lofty and penetrating minds, however, we should still be able to recognize the importance of this problem to everything we do in liberal education, for whatever position we take about the relationship between knowledge and virtue determines the kinds of *claims* that we are able to make about liberal education, and the kinds of *arguments* that we must make in order to support those claims.

The problem of the relationship between knowledge and virtue may be expressed in the following way: does a liberal education make one morally better? Is knowledge the same thing as virtue, or is virtue the product of something other than knowledge? If there is a relationship between the two is it a necessary, conditional, or merely coincidental one? When apologists for liberal education talk about the benefits of a liberal education, they often assume glibly that the only human powers developed by their brand of education are noble powers, and that continuing to develop them will automatically create a better world. Cardinal Newman constructed a powerful critique of this position, which he called liberalism: “Knowledge is one thing,” he says, “virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility, nor is largeness and justness of view faith.” As this wording reveals, however, Newman’s critique of liberal education is largely doctrinal, and for the majority who would nowadays reject doctrinal answers, the secular version of the problem remains.

A crude illustration of the problem can be obtained by asking why so many members of the German aristocracy in the 1930s, many of whom had received a traditional education at the best universities in Germany and England, violated the content and spirit of their liberal educations and supported Hitler as he moved methodically toward the conquest of Europe. Despite the example’s crudeness, it has the virtue of raising the powerful question of why the very forces that seem to civilize us may also, at times, fail us. Is it possible that the same forces that civilize us may sometimes *uncivilize* us? If they do not uncivilize us, why not? If they do, then what *is* the crucial ingredient in the development of moral goodness, and does a liberal education help supply it or not?

The easiest way for me to begin unpacking this issue is to refer to an optimistic paper of mine on liberal education that was published in the first number of *Interdisciplinary Perspectives* for 1980. In that paper I made some broad claims that implied strongly—although never quite

explicitly—that a liberal education was the same thing as moral improvement. I implied, for example, that the recipients of a liberal education, when compared to their non-liberally educated counterparts, were more likely to be socially tolerant; were less likely to be swayed by demagoguery, prejudice, habit, or emotion; were more likely to appreciate the role of the arts in society and education; were more likely to be committed to a social system of equality and freedom for all; and were more likely to think in terms of ethical values, not just practical ends.

I refer to this paper not because these claims are so extraordinary, but precisely because they are so typical. They are a prime example of what Newman calls liberalism. These claims are based on arguments that run in an unbroken line all the way back to Plato, their original creator. Plato's view of education, in fact, still provides liberal education with most of its assumptions and defenses, and his authority tends to hold in its grip not only those who *know* what Plato had to say about knowledge, virtue, and education, but those who *don't know* as well. Platonic assumptions, in other words, are not just breathed in with the air of our education; they actually constitute that air. For liberal education Platonic doctrines are the great nourishing tradition. To critique those main doctrines and their implications is my next task.

III

The optimism of liberal education is primarily a product of Plato's doctrine of human nature, which claims that human beings are first and foremost rational creatures. Humans are humans because they can reason. When they go wrong, when they do wrong, when they give in to greed and aggression or indulge themselves in brutality and deceit, they do so not because they're intrinsically bad, not in any innate sense, anyway; it's just that they are ignorant. They're bad because their rational capacities have not been developed sufficiently for them to have the knowledge they need to be good. Depend on it: When human beings know enough, when they are able to reason well enough, conduct inquiry well enough, and track down a logical sequence of ideas well enough, then they'll be good.

This view assumes that human beings are basically dualistic creatures, and that each of us has a rational self that is intrinsically a higher, better self than the lower, non-rational self out of which all our evil behavior derives. It is not difficult to see what common view of education grows out of this view of human nature. Liberal academicians have often, indeed usually, defined their educational role in the following way. "Look," they say, "since human beings are basically rational, and since rationality is fundamentally good, then the role of education is to train, develop, sensitize, enhance, expand, or enrich those rational capacities." (We have a whole raftload of honorific verbs for what we do as teachers.) This com-

mon view takes it for granted, as I did in my earlier paper, that if people are made more rational as a consequence of our training them in the ways and means of rationality, then they will be morally improved. The optimistic heart of this position is the assumption that when people are rational enough, then they will like the things they should like. When they learn to think critically enough, then they will argue themselves out of being mean, aggressive, brutal, or deceitful. They will be able to reason well enough about interests to see that evil behavior leads, at the social level, to injustice, and, at the personal level, to misery.

As I have already said, this view is lifted straight out of Plato, although we have applied it in some ways that would make his flesh creep, and I think it is important to see that buying this view means that we also buy, necessarily, two consequences that I find less persuasive than I used to, but which exhibit themselves persistently in most of our talk about how education works. The first consequence is that this view forces us to adopt Plato's determinism. He assumes that the relationship between acquiring knowledge rationally and controlling behavior rationally is an automatic one. In the *Protagoras*, for example, Socrates asserts that there is "nothing mightier than knowledge, and that knowledge, in whatever existing, must have the advantage over pleasure and all other things." When asked to account for why men err in sometimes choosing evil over good, he gives a one-word answer: "Ignorance." "This, therefore," he continues, "is the meaning of being overcome by pleasure—ignorance, and that the greatest." A few sentences later he makes his view even more explicit: "No man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature."

And he knows just exactly the kind of education that will correct ignorance and thus derail evil. As is usually the case, his metaphors and similes give him away. Education is like planting seeds or breeding animals for their improvement. In the *Republic*, for example, he states that "good nurture and education *implant* good constitutions, and these good constitutions *taking root* in a good education improve more and more, and this improvement *affects the breed in man as in other animals*" (italics mine). A little later his metaphor for education is that of dyeing cloth. In training soldiers, for example, he says that "we were contriving influences which would prepare them to *take the dye of the laws* in perfection, and *the color of their opinion* about dangers and of every other opinion was to be *indelibly fixed* by their *nurture and training*" (italics mine).

Plato is not so unobservant of human nature or behavior that he fails to recognize that desire, which he calls "the mightiest of all other solvents," often leads human beings to irrational and evil conduct, but he makes it quite clear that if the training is strict enough and rational enough, then even the impulses of desire can be controlled. From this point of view,

human beings should be able, with sufficient training of the rational faculties, to reason themselves into the very same models of open-mindedness, tolerance, compassion, aesthetic sensitivity, and civic responsibility than many of us claim to be turning our students into by giving them a liberal education. It is worth nothing, perhaps, that Plato reserves the full training of the intellect for philosophers only, and that for others he justifies even the use of deception in their education and training, but, since he argues that anyone smart enough should receive training as a philosopher, it still follows that he thought reason a sufficient guide to virtue by itself.

The second consequence of accepting Plato's view that I find it difficult to accept is that it provides no way of accounting for such obvious features of human conduct and human nature as perversity, willfulness, self-destructiveness, paradox, or premeditated malice. These features of human circumstance and conduct, moreover, exhibit themselves just as frequently among the educated and rational as among the uneducated and untrained. The consequences of paradox and malice, for example, are sometimes pernicious, sometimes merely petty, and sometimes merely mystifying, but, in any event, Plato's theory can explain neither particular behavior, such as the corrupt behavior of Socrates' brilliant friend, Alcibiades, nor general behavior, such as the perverse but common tendency among certain kinds of academics to let their political and personal rivalries, or their private ambitions, govern their conduct toward colleagues and within departments. In other words, Plato's view gives one no way to account for the obvious exceptions to his theory among those whose rational intellects have been systematically and thoroughly trained, except, of course, to say that their rational powers have not been trained well enough yet. But that is not an answer because it explains nothing. It only leads one right back into the heart of the problem, which is the problem of determining just what the relationship between education and moral improvement really is.

I can personally testify, as a matter of fact, that despite all of the training of my own intellect and rational powers which I obtained at a great liberal arts institution, the University of Chicago, the sad fact remains that I have not yet reasoned myself into anything that even looks like, much less really approaches, perfect control of my passionate self—the self awelter with mindless impulses for gratification and indulgent expression—and I really do not think that I am ever *likely* to bring the world of my desires under control by assuming that I can reason myself beyond them. In short, I can't accept Plato's view that knowledge and virtue are synonymous. I simply cannot confirm that view with any of my experience, intuitions, or reason itself. As Newman says in *The Idea of a University*, human beings will have to wait until they can “quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then

may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion, and the pride of man."

My own view is that what Plato calls my lower, non-rational self is not lower at all, at least not in the spatial way his metaphor implies. On the contrary, *my* non-rational self is right up there with all the other versions of myself that I am either trying to live up to or avoid. I'm afraid what he calls my lower self happens to be an integral part of my whole self. The lower self that Plato despises as inferior, and which he always connects with the body, clearly does not *predominate* over reason in all cases, but it certainly does not *subordinate* itself to reason in all cases either, and I think this is equally true for all human beings. The way Plato glides right past willfulness and perversity as if they were quashed—automatically, no less—by training and knowledge takes my breath away. That he so often talks as if training and knowledge are the same, especially in the *Republic*, corroborates, I take it, my assertion that this theory really is deterministic. In any event, you and I, I feel safe in asserting for us both, sometimes, perhaps often, fail to do what we know we should, even when we can load up enough reasons for what we should do to stagger an ox.

What Plato's view leaves out of account, I think, are the operations of the will and the imagination. In his *Defense of Poesie* Sidney says that "the ending end of all earthly learning is virtuous action," which he defines as being inspired not only "to well knowing but to well doing." Granting this, the truth remains that before well-knowing, which Plato thinks of as the product of rational inquiry, can be translated into well-doing, which I think of as the disposition of the whole soul to be virtuous, it has to pass through the filtering mediums of the will and the imagination. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, "Man is never a simple two-layer affair who can be understood from the standpoint of the bottom layer, should efforts to understand him from the standpoint of the top layer fail." Even fundamental impulses having their roots in our biological nature, he claims, pass through these mediums: "Human nature knows no animal impulse in its pure form. Every biological fact and every animal impulse, however obvious in its relation to the world below man, is altered because of its incorporation into the human psyche. . . . Each physical impulse, freed in man of the restraints which hedge it about in nature, can therefore develop imperial tendencies of its own. The difficulty which man experiences in bringing his various impulses into some kind of harmony is therefore not caused by the recalcitrance of nature but occasioned by the freedom of spirit."

This account of the relationship between the body on the one hand and the will and imagination on the other seems to me much more accurate than Plato's notion that if we can only be successful in straining out the

pure music of rationality from the noisy static of the body and the passions, then we should have no trouble behaving virtuously. Plato is well aware of how often people operate from pride, vanity, selfishness, ambition, deceit, and all the rest—he has Socrates endlessly scoring his fellow Athenians for these sins—yet he is convinced that they fall prey to these vices because of ignorance, because they do not know enough about the truth of things in general, and especially because they do not know enough about the truth of human nature in particular.

It seems to me, however, that human action begins not in knowledge, or in ignorance, or even in self-awareness, but in desire, and that desire is a river whose flood is only partially and uncertainly checked either by sandbags of rational control or pre-cut channels of deterministic training. As Saul Bellow says in the first paragraph of his novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, "The soul wants what it wants." In the case of the human soul swollen with pride, envy, or ambition—as human souls are occasionally known to be—then it seems simply untrue to say that acts of pride and revenge will ever be deterred or permitted, necessarily (which is what Plato claims), by what the actor knows or doesn't know, even if his or her knowledge covers every aspect of the matter from possible legal consequences to the certain knowledge of his own moral corruption. Our literary, mythical, and religious heritage, for example, is full of archetypal figures whose sin is neither knowledge nor ignorance, but desire. Figures from the Bible include Adam; the rich young man who turned sorrowfully away from Jesus; Judas, Jesus' betrayer; and Paul, who in *Romans* confesses that "the good I would I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do." Figures from literature include Shakespeare's Macbeth and Angelo, Chaucer's Pardoner, Milton's Satan, Bronte's Heathcliff, Dickens' Steerforth, and Goethe's or Marlowe's Faust. Figures from classical mythology, Plato's own literary heritage, include Homer's Paris, Achilles, and Agamemnon; Sophocles' Oedipus and Creon; and Euripedes' Medea. In the modern period there are the perverse, self-damning characters in Hardy, Flaubert, and Faulkner. The list could go on indefinitely. These stories and myths record a common but profound human scenario: human beings tasting of evil not only when they know better, but even when they possess foresight about the suffering of the innocent and their own damnation if they commit the act they know they should not. It seems unfair to me, frankly, for Plato to sail his argument about education right past this enormous reef of human perversity and frailty as if it did not really exist, or as if it could all be taken care of—simply made to disappear—if only people knew a little more about the world, or even much more about themselves. How can he claim that knowledge is virtue when nothing is more common in its appearance and destructive in its effects than the spectacle of human beings with knowledge of evil nevertheless indulging themselves in it?

The nature of desire as the origin of human conduct can only be understood, it seems to me, if we recognize that it is rooted not in reason but in imagination. In the imagination we spin out models of things we desire and then project these before us as our version of the world we want to live in. This activity is certainly not insulated completely from the influence of reason, but reason's limitations are clearly revealed by the truth that if we desire something badly enough—even if it's something we know isn't good, or good for us—nothing is easier than to use reason to cook up rationalizations for having what we want anyway. We all carry both a thesaurus and a rhyming dictionary of rationalizations tucked neatly away in the memory's top file drawer, always available for immediate access.

Plato's theory surgically removes reason from the welter of passions, feelings, imaginings, contradictions, perversities, and desires that populate our psychic life. It seems a kind of surgery to me that could never be accomplished in real life and would kill the patient if it were. I find it difficult even to consider hypothetically of reason's being isolated and cultivated apart from the psychic life of human beings generally, but it is totally impossible for me to conceive how such an isolation—supposing it done—could ever operate as the source of virtue. A reason, anyone's reason, separated from the imagination and the feelings, is a chilling, potentially monstrous, force. It is the inhuman, antihuman force that Swift ridiculed in his portrait of the Houyhnhnms; it is the inhuman, antihuman force that, divorced from pity and fellow feeling, drove the doctors who performed medical "experiments" in the Nazi concentration camps.

Even if it were possible, in other words, to know anything apart from the passions, feelings, and imagination, such knowledge would have no power to move us toward virtuous action. How can one desire to see virtue reign in human affairs, as Socrates clearly wants, if one claims that seeing virtue can only be achieved apart from the passions, imaginings, and desires that invest every other aspect of our lives? Plato's answer is that we should only follow the highest passion, the one for truth, but he does not make clear where the line between the high and low passions exists. Clear-cut distinctions can only be made between them, it seems to me, by talking about extreme examples of each. Most of the time that line is impossible to see with any clarity and most of us find that we are faced mostly not with clear choices, but ambiguity. We are forced constantly to discourse with ourselves about what it is we are really up to. The confused waters where currents of reason and desire mix and flow require being navigated with all the concentration, delicacy, and humility of a captain steering his ship through an ocean of submerged mines.

The problem of evil in human beings, then, is not so much a matter of what they know or don't know, but a matter of what they want. Reason *may* govern our lives, but only if we *want* it to, and it is the wanting, not

the reasoning, that makes all the difference. Even if what we reason best about is ethics, even then we cannot guarantee ourselves virtue. It is simply too easy to deceive ourselves about what we are up to. I can learn all there is to learn about ethics and think I am therefore virtuous without ever committing my soul to a radical confrontation with what I have learned. One of the easiest feats in the world for any of us, simply as human beings, is to compartmentalize our different sorts of utterances, so that we never see the intersections where they contradict one another. As liberal educators, for example, we are fond of quoting to our students Socrates (“The unexamined life is not worth living.”), and Thoreau (“It is not enough to be busy; the question is, what are we busy about?”), and Robert Maynard Hutchins (“The aim of liberal education is human excellence.”), but how often do we notice when we, or those around us, restrict these uplifting pieties only to the classroom, or to darkened compartments of the mind where they are not allowed to affect the business-as-usual of the university? In academe as I know it, I am afraid we are no better than the rest of the world at self-examination or deliberate action, and that we can be talked as quickly as our non-university counterparts into trading human excellence for jobs.

If we agree with Sidney that “the ending end of all earthly learning is virtuous action,” then it is not enough to teach people to reason well or to appreciate beauty—although these ends should by no means be neglected—and it is not enough to mouth pieties at them which we do not live by, but it *does* become imperative that we place them in situations where they, *and we*, must radically confront the implications of what the learning process demands from both of us.

In other words the true end of liberal education—“virtuous action”—cannot be accomplished by *ex cathedra* pronouncements, not by making people subscribe to any given set of creeds, and certainly not by assuming that if human beings learn how to reason well they will therefore behave virtuously. There are, in fact, *no* automatic or guaranteed paths to virtue whatsoever. The most helpful activity I think we can engage in is *discourse*, the activity of testing and being tested in intricate and sustained communal dance. Discourse—that ancient activity of challenging each other’s opinions because we want to know the truth of things, and the attempt to build sea-worthy arguments that will not founder in the tempests of controversy—is the most civilizing activity we can engage in. It is not in itself virtue, and it is no guarantee of virtue, but it does, so to speak, put us in the way of virtue, for it forces us into the kinds of confrontations that make it difficult—not impossible, but difficult—to maintain the pretences and evasions by which we hide the truth about ourselves from ourselves. Good hard discourse smokes out our inconsistencies and self-serving justifications, and, if approached in the right spirit, teaches us better than any other activity to know ourselves.

Inevitably, of course, discourse is also the activity that justifies reason's reappearance. Freed from Plato's restrictions on it, reason reunited with the larger life of feelings, imaginings, sympathies, and intuitions, nourishes and guides discourse, not as the exclusive arbiter of truth, but as one among several indispensable tools employed in truth's pursuit. Nothing I have said has been intended to depreciate reason's power or to recommend its abandonment. We cannot abandon reason and hope to get anywhere, or even hope to remain human. Abandoning reason would diminish us as much as abandoning language would, or giving up our opposable thumbs. What I object to is not the use of reason as a tool, but Plato's insistence that it is the *only* tool human beings should rely on for the discovery of truth, and I object to our insistence, implicit though it may be, that our instruction in rational knowledge is tantamount to moral improvement.

Clearly, as a tool, it is impossible for either reason or knowledge to be principles of automatic virtue, for they may be put to evil as well as good ends, and it is mere evasion on Plato's part to imply that knowledge put to evil ends is not really knowledge. It also follows that, as the agency that transmutes ignorance into knowledge, reason is never a totally independent agency of any kind, and is not best described—Plato and the later Romantics notwithstanding—as a separate faculty of the mind. I am convinced, ultimately, that reasoning and imagining are so far from being separate faculties, communicating with each other only over great distances, that they may be said, instead, to intermingle like light and air on a sunny day. To put it another way, reasoning and imagining are flip sides of the same coin. Not only can they not exist apart, any mistaken attempt to separate them debases the currency of thought altogether. In recent years science has come to recognize, for example, that even scientific thought—which science had long claimed was merely descriptive, not interpretive—is, like all other modes of thought, a product of the *interplay* between reason and imagination, not a product of their separation. Science now accepts, for example, the notion of “theory-laden” facts, and the work of philosophers of science such as Thomas Kuhn, Michael Polanyi, Russell Norwood Hansen, Stephen Toulmin, and Jacob Bronowski argues persistently and persuasively that it is not only undesirable to attempt to separate facts from interpretation, but that, in the last analysis, it is impossible.

Contrary to Plato's ambition of separating them, if only in philosophers, reason and desire are always mingled. The manic conduct of a Rasputin or the diabolical conduct of a Hitler cannot be adequately explained as desire or passion going wild and thus trampling reason, any more than the artistic genius of a Mozart or the altruism of a Schweitzer can be adequately explained as desire or passion taking flight and thus transcending reason. Reason plays its role in all aspects of human conduct, good or

evil, and so does desire. The truth is that no one really knows exactly *how* they mingle to produce either creative or destructive effects. Poets have often spoken of following the intuitions that lead them to poems, and mass murderers have often spoken of hearing voices that lead them to kill, but both use reason to plan and execute their different designs. Clearly, reason and passion unfold themselves simultaneously and in each other's company, the same way a plant unfolds bush and blossom together, neither one existing for the sake of the other, neither capable of existing in the continual absence of the other, both different in manifestation but tied together by an underlying unity of which they are various expressions. Plato's problem, as I see it, is not that he fails to recognize the presence or importance of both reason and passion in human life, but that his theory for explaining their relationship forces him into the difficulty of either proffering explanations for large areas of human conduct that do not really explain anything, or ignoring these areas, obvious though they may be, as if they did not exist.

In closing I would like to make two final points, both of them qualifications. The first is that in quarreling with Plato I am fully aware that he is the master, I the learner. My aim has not been to settle Plato's hash, as a student of mine once put it, but to ask some questions and probe some problems that I think Plato's doctrines raise for liberal education. In former times when our culture was more secure about the value of its intellectual traditions one had not to worry as much as now, I think, that one's criticism of a great text or author might be seen by others as an attempt at dismissal (or even dismemberment). To call for Plato's dismissal—as I heard it called for at the same conference where I read the original version of this paper—in the name of liberal education is, at best, a contradiction in terms.

Second, I am aware that there is much in Plato's writings that may be brought to his defense in the quarrel I have picked. One may distinguish more sharply than I have done between the earlier dialogues, where Socrates dominates, and the later works where Plato does. Or, one may appeal to the notion of *eros* as it finds expression in Plato, and point to the myth of the steeds in the *Phaedrus* as an account of the relationship between reason and passion that is more problematic than the accounts I point to in the *Protagoras* and the *Republic*. These urgings only go to show, I think, that a really great text is what it is, in one respect at least, not because of a single truth it announces early and we receive passively, but precisely because it sends us madly scrambling for one interpretation after another, an activity that has the happy effect of sharpening our wits without ever seeming to dull the text.

In any event, whether this critique of Plato's doctrines is adequate or not, it nevertheless illustrates the kind of arguments I think we in liberal

education need to be making: arguments that carry us into confrontations with our deep assumptions, not arguments that take our critics' detractions as their starting point. The arguments about the practical advantages of liberal education, for example, need to be made, but, unless they are nourished by the activity, conducted at a more fundamental level, of ceaseless self-criticism and examination, then even the practical arguments will either atrophy from lack of inner life, or be co-opted by those whose arguments have nothing to do with liberal education at all. Radical criticism going on at all times, however, will not only prevent us from lapsing into glibness and complacency, but will allow us to preserve a sense of coherent identity, and provide a sound base for the creation of coherent programs and curriculums.