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Skepticism, Stoicism, and the Jeffersonian Model: Three Philosophical Responses to the Crisis in the Humanities

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Abstract: This paper examines the degree to which the relevance of an education in the Humanities hinges on our finding the value of what we do in the classroom. Specifically, we need to reflect on what occurs in the classroom when we attempt to engage students in philosophy. What are we saying to them? Can they even hear us? What do they do with what we give them? These questions go to the heart of what an education in philosophy entails: are we learning historic arguments, sound methods, or life skills? Each of the three authors will call upon Hellenistic texts to frame separate responses to the ways in which philosophers could be thinking about these questions—questions about these possibly changing times (complacency and cynicism) and the perceived crisis in the Humanities.

Keywords: Philosophy, Cynicism, Complacency

THOSE OF US who work in the humanities as professors, mentors, artists, and administrators are confronted daily by the crisis in the humanities.¹ It is this crisis that served as the theme for the 2007 International Symposium on New Directions in the Humanities at Columbia University. It is a crisis we hear in the confident voices of suspicion whenever a parent, a student, or, too often, a faculty colleague questions the contemporary relevance of the humanities or their presence in general education requirements. Such elitist, or worse, impractical studies, one hears, serve merely as speed bumps in the fast-lane to a “job.”

Countering this impatience with the humanities, we propose three philosophical responses. Using as his metaphor Plato’s problematic framings of the Socratic dialectic, which is traditionally interpreted as an ideal educational model for young Athenians, Professor Aiken argues that Thomas Jefferson provides a defensible ‘American’ response to the crisis in the humanities that could serve to revitalize the area. Alternatively, Professor Gray defends a more traditional version of the Socratic life of inquiry, contrasting Socratic ignorance with the institutionalized and complacent ignorance of skeptic Sextus Empiricus. Finally, Professor Snider suggests (with reference to Epictetus and Pierre Hadot) that we should practice philosophy as a therapeutic way of living in an effort to overcome the suspicion or cynicism of our students for which we, teachers of the humanities in general, are in part to blame. All three perspectives share a belief that the humanities

need not be saved by a pedagogical messiah from without, but instead can be revitalized by returning to and reconsidering its ancient heritage. The three positions offered in this essay each offer complementary, yet different, responses to the crisis in the humanities through various ideas on how best to embrace this heritage, responding to forces of hopelessness, complacency, and cynicism.

Conversations and Conversions: Humanities in the State University

Presenter: David Aiken

In this paper I assume the following to be the case: first, that it is predominately those areas of academic study leading to jobs and/or job placement that enjoy intellectual and financial institutional preference; *generally speaking, fields in the Humanities do not lead to jobs*; second, that there are limited academic funding resources, all sources combined, and that, generally speaking, it is those fields of study that lead to empirically measurable results/benefits (*e.g.*, science/medicine, military, economics, etc.), which will receive systematic funding from our universities, and those same fields that will, in turn, become sources of funding revenue for our universities; and finally, that modern cultural values, such as globalization, diversity, etc., must, in the final analysis, create societies that are fragmented and relativistic (*i.e.*, diversified), and that this will necessarily result in the fragmentation of the classical or traditional (elitising) agenda that presently hovers around the study

¹ The title of the original panel presentation was: “Three Philosophical Responses to ‘Changing Times,’ Or, ‘Can You Hear Me Now?’”



of Humanities. These assumptions address, to some degree at any rate, several of the stated 'Problems in the Humanities' proposed by this conference venue, which are 1) that the Humanities are intellectually marginalized in our institutions; 2) that funding for Humanities programs is constantly threatened; and 3) that there are tensions between classical or traditional Humanities & the more recent cultural & critical orientation of some Humanities programs. Now questions of funding aside (#2)—although they are certainly not unrelated to the arguments of this paper—if it seems apparent that scholars engaged in the various disciplines of Humanistic studies are desirous of harmonizing the Humanities, *i.e.*, of defining an overarching and common agenda for the study of Humanities in America (#1 & #3), it would seem equally obvious that most of these traditional attempts will end in failure. It shall be the task of my contribution to explain why this must be so.

I propose both as an argument against and metaphor for at least some elements of the present crises in the Humanities, the various "FAILURES" of the great ethicist Socrates, and especially those failures dramatically represented by Plato in the *Euthyphro*; for where Socrates failed formerly, I see little hope of success presently. Using as a springboard, then, James Arieti's rather original and certainly provocative readings of the dialogues as drama (*Interpreting Plato*, Rowman & Littlefield (MD), 1991), I suggest that in the *Euthyphro* Plato stages for our consideration the inevitably unsuccessful dialectic between the flexible spirit of inquiry (Socrates) and the adamantine cocoon of willfully ignorant belief (Euthyphro), a confrontation that frames and re-presents in fact the *aporia* underpinning the assumptions I sketched out at the beginning of this paper. As a dialogue in philosophy, Plato's audience is entitled to suppose that an honest attempt is being made by the protagonists in the *Euthyphro* to dis- or un-cover some truth concerning the discursive subject: piety and the gods. Yet we are not so fortunate; for the *Euthyphro* is ultimately, and very obviously, inconclusive. Socrates is unable to bring Euthyphro to 'see' his ignorance concerning the gods, which means that Euthyphro will not, and if we may anticipate upon his future, will probably never question the piety of his own suit against his father for impiety. Thus, in following out the metaphor of our argument, Socrates' failure to persuade the willfully ignorant Euthyphro also foreshadows his inability to persuade the jury at his own trial for impiety, which also confirms us in concluding that the second charge Meletus brings against Socrates during his trial (*viz.* corrupting the youth of Athens), is highly implausible.

As we step back, then, in an attempt to get Plato's 'big' picture concerning the importance of Socrates

as a philosophical teacher, and to understand how the successes and failures of Socrates might apply to us today as we attempt to solve the problems we see evolving in the various types of social discourse in which the Humanities engage, we, the audience, are encouraged to suppose that, in reality, Socrates had no more general success in corrupting the minds of the Athenian youths than he had, specifically, in getting Euthyphro to see the obvious errors in his thinking about piety and the gods. Secondly, in the *Euthyphro* Plato seems to problematize the specific futility of an inquiring Socrates trying to reason with an 'un-inquiring' Euthyphro, and so seems perhaps to suggest the general futility of attempting to engage in honest inquiry with anyone of faith. At the end of the drama, the audience is left wondering what good Socrates has really accomplished in the *polis*, and whether, in fact, we may not conclude that his life was really, at least in terms of its philosophical import, a series of failures—failure to find philosophical answers to philosophical questions concerning piety and the gods, failure to encourage Euthyphro to a clearer and more appropriate way of reasoning, failure to persuade the jury of his innocence, failure finally either to teach, or even to corrupt, the youth of Athens. Upon this reading, does not Plato lead us to the conclusion that genuine "Socratic" dialectic, which should, ideally, lead us to intellectual conversion (*cf.* Stoicism) and which should, ideally, make of us wise men, is in fact futile when confronted with an audience that is disposed neither to conversion nor to wisdom? And by extension of our metaphor, are we not lead to the same conclusion of futility when we consider that the same insurmountable obstacles that faced, and finally crushed Socrates, continue to face those who engage in the modern humanistic pursuits?

Now, assuming the plausibility both of the metaphor and of our argument, there are, obviously, a variety of possible responses to the question of how the Humanities might position themselves *vis-à-vis* changing times; but for the most part these responses are, I suggest, ultimately unsatisfactory. There are, for example, metaphorical responses to my metaphor, one of which might be derived from a dramatic reading of Plato's *Theaetetus*. The hopeful optimism of the *Theaetetus* is that there will inevitably be some searching, inquiring minds 'out there', and that we must persevere in the Humanities for the sake of those few who may one day come along, such as the humble Theaetetus, in their search for truth-in-the-world. This hopeful optimism is ubiquitous in the Humanities, and is reflected famously in Nietzsche's forward to the *Antichrist*: "Dies Buch gehört den wenigsten. Vielleicht lebt selbst noch keiner von ihnen. (This Book belongs to the very few. And it may well be that none of them are even alive yet.)"

However, if we actually and publically dare to formulate this elitising argument in our various Humanities disciplines, then we must surely also be prepared to accept that, given the democratic accessibility generally underpinning entrance to America's universities, and the P.C. environment of the modern intellectual and cultural arenas, the vast majority of our universities, distaining this unacceptable discourse, must and will continue to consider Humanities departments second class intellectual citizens, and that they will continue to throw us only the crumbs of financial support.

However, leaving behind otherwise unsatisfactory "Theaetetic" rejoinders to my Euthyphro-as-metaphor argument, there are also other, certainly more practical interpretations of the role of the Humanities in the modern intellectual arena. What if we assume, for example, that the type of dilemma Plato frames in the *Euthyphro* does not speak to the current issues addressing the Humanities, in contrast to what I have suggested? What if the over-arching purpose of the Humanistic discourse is in fact rather more practical than philosophical or theoretical? An illustration of such a practical interpretation is the archiving role of the Humanities as suggested by, *inter alia*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* or Ayn Rand's *Anthem*. From this point of view it may be said that the broader picture of what we do in the Humanities is to encompass, to archive, and to transmit all facets of human experience and knowledge, both empirical and beyond. And while this is clearly an accurate depiction of what happens in the various disciplines of Humanistic studies, nonetheless, to consider the Humanities solely, or even only largely, under these auspices still fails to provide adequate answers for the difficult questions posed by this conference venue: viz., why that the Humanities are intellectually marginalized; why funding for Humanities programs is constantly threatened; and why there are tensions between classical or traditional Humanities & the more recent cultural & critical orientation of some Humanities programs.

Finally, there are obviously philosophical responses to our Euthyphro-as-metaphor argument. Pierre Hadot is to a large degree responsible in the modern generation for the rekindled idea of philosophy as an exercise that frames the philosophical life. Following in the tradition of the Stoics, the early Christians, Ignatius of Loyola, et al, Hadot suggests a "stoic" impetus that sees value in the practice of a life lived philosophically, and argues that the philosophical practice of life is persuasively sensible because the life of the mind is the sole means for the individual to arrive at happiness. From among the plurality of life-options in societies that are both fragmented and relativistic, the philosophical life must certainly be more desirable than the life of men

lived as brute beasts. This response is certainly in keeping with traditional interpretations of the drama of Plato's *Theaetetus*, where both the humble Theaetetus and the wise Socrates fail to solve the *aporia* concerning human knowledge, but where Plato's audience is left with the idea that the dramatic action of life does not necessarily lie in understanding or interpreting and resolving specific intellectual problems, but lies rather in the simple philosophical practice of coming together to reason (vaguely) and to speak (without hope of true discovery) about reality and the human experience. At the very least, one argues, this process increases human understanding about the human condition. However, this idealisation of human inquiry as the goal of the humanities, especially when the student of ideas begins to understand that on this reading human inquiry does not lead necessarily to increase in knowledge, still falls short of addressing meaningfully the hard questions posed at the outset of this conference venue.

While no interpretation of Plato's dramatic Socrates may provide a totally unequivocal description and response to problems presently confronting the Humanities, and especially in the American Academy, there does yet remain an American response to our difficult questions. One persuasive response to the questions of this conference, which is at once meaningful, intellectually satisfying, and relevant to the specifically American evolution of studies in the Humanities, is the principle of education proposed by Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. Unlike the philosophical exercise of wisdom traditionally embraced by the western and profoundly platonized intellectual tradition, in this new experiment in self-governance called America, argues Jefferson, the people need to be generally educated in order to watch over and safeguard the orderly outworking of governance by the people—the people need to be educated in order to protect against the corruption of political power into tyranny. "The most effectual means of preventing [the perversion of power into tyranny]", suggests Jefferson, are,

to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large, and more especially to give them knowledge of those facts which history exhibits, that possessed thereby of the experience of other ages and countries, they may be enabled to know ambition under all its shapes, and prompt to exert their natural powers to defeat its purposes (Thomas Jefferson: Diffusion of Knowledge Bill, 1779. FE 2:221, Papers 2:526).

Quite distinct from the *paideia* of the Greeks, the type of education to which Jefferson alludes constitutes in fact the bedrock of a distinctly American

liberal education, namely politics, history, and the study of philosophy for virtue. Even more broadly conceived, though, Jefferson speaks of a people that is at once wise and honest, happy and virtuous.

Laws will be wisely formed and honestly administered in proportion as those who form and administer them are wise and honest; whence it becomes expedient for promoting the public happiness that those persons whom nature has endowed with genius and virtue should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens...(Thomas Jefferson: Diffusion of Knowledge Bill, 1779. FE 2:221, Papers 2:527).

So, although the metaphors and criticisms that have been suggested in my argument do not necessarily elucidate the varied problematic of Platonic interpretation, they yet serve the purpose of demonstrating, by a consideration of Socrates's dramatic dialogues, the insufficiencies of classical western thought to solve the difficulties presently confronting American Humanities. This allows us to consider in perhaps a new light the radical educational propositions of Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, and to envision a Jeffersonian response to the questions we are presently here asking concerning the role, and value, and purpose of the study of the Humanities in the American society. At the very least, such a response must include the idea that all teachers of the Humanities in America must be engaged in the struggle to ensure that the Humanities, through a Liberal education, finally and definitively constitute the core requirement of all education in America. Jefferson did not conceive of an America in which the study of the Human Sciences would be in crisis, in which the Humanities would have to skirmish with the "hard" sciences for institutional approval and funding dollars. In present-day America, among the very first subjects to be funded are in the harder sciences, and among those to be cut in times of budget deficit, subjects in the Humanities and the Arts. In Jefferson's vision of American, however, the education of the people lies not in the furtherance of the hard sciences; but in the general improvement of the individual gatekeepers of democracy, which has always been the interest and specific goal of the Humanities.

The value of science [*i.e.*, general knowledge] to a republican people, the security it gives to liberty by enlightening the minds of its citizens, the protection it affords against foreign power, the virtue it inculcates, the just emulation of the distinction it confers on nations foremost in it; in short, its identification with power, morals, order and happiness (which merits to it premi-

ums of encouragement rather than repressive taxes), are considerations [that should] always [be] present and [bear] with their just weight. (Thomas Jefferson: On the Book Duty, 1821).

To a very large degree indeed, the continuity of a nation's political, social, and cultural heritage is established and guaranteed by the ties that bind students to their teachers. So to enable a Jeffersonian vision, which strives after the ongoing improvement of democracy's gatekeepers, we teachers of Humanities must continue to insist upon the study of those subjects that keep our eyes riveted upon Power of all sorts, and upon the subtle permutations of power into tyranny. We need to study history, and politics, civics and current events in order to keep before our eyes the political institutions whereby Men define and govern themselves; and we need to study foreign languages, philosophy, religions, mythologies and literatures, and all the sciences in order to understand that it is through various and diverse languages and "stories" that we as a people initially begin to frame, and then to flesh out, our political and social institutions, which in turn become reflections of the intellectual life of the American demos. Why do we do this? Because, "[i]f the children are untaught, their ignorance and vices will in future life cost us much dearer in their consequences than it would have done in their correction by a good education" (Thomas Jefferson to Joseph C. Cabell, 1818. FE 10:99).

The Crisis of the Humanities: Skepticism and the Rattling of Cages in the New Millennium

Presenter: John Scott Gray

This section of the essay argues that the assertion that there exists a crisis in the humanities has been overblown. While the face of higher education is a changing one, as the call to assessment and the business model of education stress quantifiable results now, this critic asserts that the humanities continue to maintain a central role in the educational development of future generations. Over the next few pages, this essay briefly discusses the criticisms lodged against the humanities (in particular philosophy), both from without and from within. In terms of these internal criticisms, this essay considers in particular the criticism lodged by the skeptic Sextus Empiricus that philosophy damages those who undertake its practice by preventing the possibility for tranquility, a claim which could easily expand to all areas of the humanities that attempt to question and understand humanity and our surrounding environment.

Literature, Philosophy and the Fine Arts have traditionally carried the torch as central components of

a Western liberal arts education. To be considered well-rounded one was expected to have grounded their particular interests in the great ideas and great texts of the Anglo-European culture. Criticisms, however, have continued to be lodged against the Humanities, with some well-founded (criticisms that point out the misogynistic and ethnocentric nature of many courses that were taught within these departments) and some perhaps more open to debate. For example, some college administrators question the value of Humanities programs in aiding the development of students whose career path in areas outside the humanities has already been determined, (for example, can taking philosophy courses help a nursing major become a better nurse?) The asking of questions about the meaning of life, the universe, and everything else, as well as the tireless search for answers, seems, at least in the eyes of many, to be losing its luster.

This phenomenon is compounded by a post-9/11 world that seems more inclined to embrace a dualism that divides the world into clear and distinct compartments, (you're with us or you're with the terrorists, stay the course or cut and run, Bush is an excellent leader or he's entirely and completely incompetent). The Humanities have traditionally been concerned with investigating the gray area of meaning between and beyond the "realities" that our society provides as our social/cultural given. It seems as if the middle ground of understanding and compromise has become increasingly lost, giving way to the dogmatism of the extremes, even within the ivory tower itself.

Hellenistic skeptics of the Pyrrhonian mold, such as second century A.D. thinker Sextus Empiricus, were also critical of the practice of philosophy, but for slightly different reasons. According to Sextus, the constant raising of questions and the search for their answers leaves one in a continuous quest for something that cannot, in the end, be discovered – unequivocal and unquestioned truth. For Sextus, investigations of this type prevent *ataraxia* (translated as untroubledness or tranquility). Instead of insisting upon the method of doubt common to more modern interpretations of skepticism, Sextus suggests that the proper response to philosophical questions and dilemmas was to adopt the attitude of *aporia*, which basically entails admitting that one is at a loss, a concept further explained by commentator Benson Mates as the state of being "baffled, perplexed, puzzled, stumped, stymied," (*The Skeptic Way*, pg. 30-31). Once we accept the fact that the various options and arguments leave us at a loss, we allow *ataraxia* to occur. According to Sextus, "[s]uspension of judgment is a standstill of the intellect, owing to which we neither reject nor posit anything. Tranquility is freedom from disturbance or calmness of soul," (*Outlines of Scepticism*, pg. 5). Sextus Empiricus is

right in his assertion that doing philosophy (and by doing I mean joining the process of asking questions and using reasoning to seek out acceptable answers) may disturb and at times baffle us, interfering with the ability to achieve *ataraxia*.

The problem that faces the university, and the question that troubles the philosopher who replies to Sextus, deals with the degree to which Hellenistic *ataraxia* develops into 21st century complacency. There are three kinds of tranquility that we should consider; first, the tranquility that comes from burying one's head in the sand (a condition that involves an ignorance of ignorance), second, the tranquility of *ataraxia* Sextus spoke of that comes from the acceptance of ignorance, and third, the tranquility that comes from, as a colleague of mine in graduate school used to call it, knowing the score and embracing the challenge. The challenge of ignorance can be the basis for its own tranquility as it allows one to better assess their place in the universe, as well as offer the starting point for a method of improving their position.

This is the lesson of Socrates and the examined life that has been taught a million times in introduction to philosophy courses around the world. In the *Apology*, Socrates seems to not be concerned with the quest for certainty modernity has provided us when he remarks that, "it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue everyday." Just the undertaking of the discussion itself is a victory in Socrates' mind, regardless of where it might lead. This is the point of the *Euthyphro* – not frustration at the inability of the conversants to define piety, but the hope that comes from the realization of uncertainty itself. Socrates, in effect, desires to rattle Euthyphro's cage, moving him from the ignorance of ignorance toward the challenge of ignorance. While they may end the conversation at a loss, the question that haunts my mind reading the *Euthyphro* is not 'what is piety' but instead, what happens next in the life of Euthyphro. Does he return to his prosecution of his father, or is his dogmatic certainty so shaken by the conversation with Socrates that he finds himself re-evaluating his actions, and his life as a whole?

My curiosity at the future of Euthyphro mirrors my curiosity at the futures of the students that find their way into my classroom. The dogmatic tranquility that comes with having one's head buried in the sand, like all dogmatism, does not allow an opportunity for growth. The same can be said for the acceptance of ignorance that Sextus appears to present. The Humanities, in all its various forms, desire the mental, spiritual, and cultural growth of the students that we face in the classroom. Our students, as they mature, become increasingly aware that existence brings with it difficult questions regarding how to live and what to value. These difficult questions are not

solved by throwing up our hands and admitting that we are at a loss, nor are they addressed by dogmatically maintaining that we already have acceptable answers.

Returning to the nursing student mentioned earlier, while his or her nursing program might provide that student with the procedures of their practice (teaching one how to do their job *properly*), a broader education that includes the Humanities can help that student understand at a deeper and more fundamental level how to do that job *well*, or better yet how to live well while *doing* that job well. This process, however, does more than serving to help the student transition from matters of pure theory to practice, but instead seeks *eupraxia*, or the well being that comes through good practice. General education requirements that call for courses that endeavor to cover topics such as cultural enrichment and gender/racial understanding admit and embrace the broader education that underpins these concepts, and courses in the Humanities have and still play a central role in this education.

Turning our attention to an issue currently troubling many in this country, we should consider perhaps the defining issues of our time -- the War in Iraq, as well as the larger War on Terrorism. A discussion about these issues might not be found in a MBA program, a Survey Engineering Department, Chemistry courses, a Pre-Law program or in a School of Nursing. The Humanities, however, from Literature's writings, History's lessons, Philosophy's justifications, and Art's expressions of the human condition, provide an unparalleled opportunity to discuss these conflicts. These issues will not be solved or even understood with any depth or sophistication by denial or dogmatism. Students may, like Euthyphro, believe that they understand these conflicts, as well as what should be done about them, but is that belief grounded on sound reasoning and considered arguments crafted in the context of a dialogue with the views of others? The deaths of U.S. servicemen and women occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the political unrest gripping the new Iraq, will not simply disappear. Having covered the philosophy of war and terrorism in my ethics course (as a topic selected by my students, I might add), I can attest that a deeper, systematic consideration of the situation, as well as the events that precipitated it, often leave us with more questions than answers. Yet these questions about the value of life, when to put life at risk, and our understanding of death, are questions that our students, in particular our nursing student, must thoughtfully consider. These questions and the resulting conversations help to move our students from the ignorance of their own ignorance to, at the very least, an enlightened awareness of the challenge of ignorance as a starting point that can serve in part

to prevent complacency. As Socrates himself famously remarked, it is this awareness of our ignorance that is perhaps the greatest knowledge, in large part because it presents us with the challenge that hopes for a higher standard of discourse. It also appears that Jefferson would agree with these assertions because the awareness of our limitations can serve to help prevent the perverse transition of power into tyranny.

Of course, on these points I perhaps risk preaching to the choir. We in the Humanities answer our critics as we continue to broaden the scope of our work beyond the traditional western texts of the great books and great works, diversifying our intellectual portfolio through a consideration of underrepresented voices. Regardless of the philosophers or texts studied and the questions considered, Philosophy and the Humanities must return to its roots and embrace our role as having the ability to serve as a window into the human condition. With that being said, assessment and the business model are not to be feared, for the things that take place in our courses can most certainly be assessed. Although this assessment might be undertaken in ways other than the pedestrian pre and post tests used by some departments, we should continue to seek out ways to uncover and demonstrate the effect of our classroom practices on our students. Perhaps one model might involve a program that questions returning alumni regarding which courses they found had the greatest impact in their personal and professional development. My intuition tells me that many of our courses would do surprisingly well in this regard. After all, the methods of philosophy and the tools presented in the Humanities, can last a lifetime. As Pierre Hadot points out in "Spiritual Exercises," Socratic dialogues are "a combat amicable, but real. . . it is necessary to make oneself change one's point of view, attitude, set of convictions, therefore to dialogue with oneself, therefore to struggle with oneself," (*Philosophy as a Way of Life*, pg. 20). In conclusion, I assert that the solution to the "so-called" crisis of the Humanities is to recognize that there is no crisis if we only choose to re-visit and re-assert the importance of reflection, examination and struggle in the development of good careers, good people and good lives.

The Price of Tranquility: Stoic Therapy in an Age of Cynicism

Presenter: Grant Snider

Another way to describe the crisis facing the humanities is to say that students and others view our enterprise from a perspective of cynicism, a sort of disbelief or even distrust of what we do for a living. Contemporary and classical versions of cynicism, although they should never be conflated completely,

do encourage a brand of disengagement with the social and political world: Diogenes, after all, was the first “cosmopolitan,” a person without a specific home in the cosmos—someone unburdened by a need to remain attentive to the specific ethical or personal needs of the *other*. (Some readers see this as worldliness, others as an act of exile.) One might argue that Diogenes and the contemporary cynic both absolve themselves of becoming caring citizens. At best, theirs is a politics of satire or transgression. In my view, though, the danger of cynical thinking is that one may become so disengaged from “the commonwealth [of] the whole world,” to borrow a phrase from Diogenes (Davenport 58), as to become irrelevant in this cosmopolitan, exiled state. What is ironic to me is that philosophers, at least we teachers of philosophy, have for some time enjoyed our own exiled position within the academy—serving as accomplices in our own isolation by the way we teach. Some basic tenets of Stoicism—and more so its methods as chronicled by Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault—offer us a chance to rethink what we do in the name of philosophy, and offer us some hope of reclaiming a relevant role in the academy and in the world alike. A quick quotation from Nietzsche is instructive: “We want to serve history [we could say the humanities] only to the extent that history serves life: for it is possible to value the study of history to such a degree that life becomes stunted and degenerate” (59). The question we should ask is how effective have we been in making the humanities serve the lives of our students, to what extent are we making ourselves relevant to and engaged in the lives of our students.

Such a question arose in my own reflections two years ago when I was teaching a course called *Living the Good Life* in which students were reading selections from *The Handbook* of Epictetus. This was my first time teaching this work, and I was unsure what responses it might generate from the students. I could not have imagined the number of Stoic conversions that took place. Granted, a few students already had read *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius, but nothing had prepared me for what happened in this course. Students often used his phrases in their hallway conversations with friends. One student, notably, was so taken with his approach to living that when a relative passed away, the student sent her mourning relatives sympathy cards filled with quotations from Epictetus. I told myself at the time that something about his version of Stoicism was resonating in the lives of these students.

In retrospect, it was not simply the specific tenets of Stoicism that excited the students, it was the very methods of doing philosophy—philosophy as a way of life—that had captured them: the course actually had assigned the spiritual exercises—what Hadot

calls “psychagogic exercises” or soul inspiring “therapeutics” (Hadot 21, 84), and it was these that had made philosophy serve life. The methods employed in that course, having students actually engage in spiritual exercises, required students to live philosophically in the sense detailed by Hadot in his book *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. To teach philosophy after this book is to shift from a pedagogy of inquiry to an engaged therapeutics (a *psychagogy*) of living. This shift is what can make philosophy, and perhaps can make the humanities in general, relevant and vital again.

Hadot details too many therapeutics for us to include here, but he does offer an instructive overview:

Thanks to Philo of Alexandria, however, we do possess two lists of spiritual exercises. They do not completely overlap, but they do have the merit of giving us a fairly complete panorama of Stoico-Platonic inspired philosophical therapeutics. One of these lists enumerates the following elements: research (*zetesis*), thorough investigation (*skepsis*), reading (*anagnosis*), and indifference to indifferent things. The other names successively: reading, meditations (*meletai*), therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things, self-mastery (*enkrateia*), and the accomplishment of duties. (84)

While it is clear that some of these elements are present in a pedagogy of inquiry (research, reading, investigation), there are other elements often absent in the philosophy classroom (therapies of the passions, remembrance of good things, and meditation). It is these latter elements that allow one to see the value of philosophy for living.

Students in our courses can be asked to demonstrate some skill at the application of this material through something as simple as keeping a “spiritual exercise journal.” Rather than merely serving as a medium of emotive student writing (as is often the case in journal projects) this version draws upon practices Hadot generalizes from the likes of Galen and Aurelius: “First thing in the morning, we should go over in advance what we have to do during the course of the day, and decide on the principles which will guide and inspire our actions. In the evening, we should examine ourselves again, so as to be aware of the faults we have committed or the progress we have made” (qtd. in 85). The journal serves as the vehicle for those meditations, and students can assess the relative success and merits of applying philosophical principles to their own lives.

While any number of elements of Stoicism and therapeutics might be discussed here, there are three elements that make this approach work. In terms of the specific tenets of Stoicism, à la Hadot, we can

show our students how to achieve a state of tranquility. The most basic teaching of Stoicism is “some things are up to us and others are not” (Epictetus 287). Helping our often anxious students understand that while much of the world shows little respect for our desires, our own internal responses, judgments, and reactions are within our control—and that we can craft them in an intentional way. This lesson can help us achieve the sort of tranquility and reduced worry promised by Stoicism.

A second Stoic tenet, *prosopa* (Gill xxii) answers a potential criticism to the apparent detached (stoical?) reaction to the suffering of others, and it provides a way for philosophy and our students to engage in the world directly, personally, and meaningfully. In the *Handbook*, Epictetus suggests:

When you see someone weeping in sorrow at the departure of his child or the loss of his property, take care not to be carried away by the impression that he is involved in externals that are bad, but at once be ready to say, ‘It is not what has happened that afflicts this person (for it does not afflict another), but his judgment concerning it.’ As far as words go, however, do not shrink from sympathizing with him, and even, if the opportunity arises, from groaning with him; but be careful not to groan inwardly too. (292)

The point here is that while we should internally understand that we face challenges in living that are beyond our control (the loss of a loved one), we should stay committed and supportive in our roles within family and social structures (offering comfort to those who have lost the loved one). Students are attracted to this tenet, I believe, because it gives them a way to engage the world around them that is immediate and effective when they would otherwise turn away from discussions about political or civic responsibility. *Prosopa* can lead to that engagement, to be sure, but students do not seem as quick to react cynically about the Stoic approach to that engagement. The concept of *Prosopa* (responsibility to a social role) makes philosophy attentive to the other, to ethics, to being-with others—the Jeffersonian dream, perhaps.

Third, the specific and detailed therapeutic practices described by Hadot are consistent with current best-practices in learning-centered teaching. The practice of philosophy as a way of life (reinforced through spiritual or *psychagogic* exercises) makes philosophy serve life: makes it relevant, necessary, useful, and personal—all of the best traits suggested in research on student learning. Students will respond to this approach, and they will see the value of philosophy, and they will ask for more of it from their institutions.

A few words here at the end about cynicism. Would anyone ever use Diogenes in the same comforting way my student had used Epictetus to comfort mourning relatives? Why not? Perhaps cynicism in its various forms cannot serve life. After all, Diogenes reminds us, “no one can live with me as a companion: it would be too inconvenient” and “of what use is a philosopher who doesn’t hurt anybody’s feelings?” (Davenport 39-40) So long as teaching practices in the humanities remain exiled, on a cynical island of the blessed, unwilling to engage in the debates about student learning and assessment, or unwilling to stoop to justifications about relevance, the humanities will continue to lose their all important offerings to life.

Considering the themes raised by my colleagues, the assertion made here regarding the tools of Stoicism clearly connects with the Socratic treatment of pedagogy. This Stoic-Socratic approach to philosophy as a way of life is consistent with philosophy as an open-ended process, and like the Jeffersonian alternative, emphasizes the growth of responsible citizens. The Stoic-Socratic method of engaging life at the most personal levels provides students a response to their lived need for philosophy. It also provides us a caution against waiting for the perfect philosophy, against waiting for a perfect approach to education, a caution even against demanding an immediately responsible citizen. Here is Epictetus in direct yet forgiving terms:

What sort of teacher, then, are you still waiting for, that you should delay setting yourself right until he comes? . . . now is the time of the contest, and the Olympic games have arrived, and that you cannot defer things any longer, and that it rests on a single day and a single action whether your progress is lost or maintained. That was how Socrates became the man he was, by heeding nothing but his reason in all that he encountered. *And even if you are not yet a Socrates, you should live as one who does indeed wish to be a Socrates.* (Epictetus 305, italics added)

Our students hunger for a Socrates in our classrooms. One of the best things we can provide them is spiritual exercises that foster an awareness of the Socrates already available and accessible within themselves.

Concluding Remarks

What is shared in these three responses to the “crisis in the humanities” is a belief that an apologetics for “the humanities” based on the search for absolutes will not convince in this age of distrust in Truth. The first response here confronts the Socratic tradition

with respect to its failure to convert young Athenians to the ways of philosophy. This response also encourages us to consider the hopeful Jeffersonian ideal of an educated citizenry to justify the Humanities to anyone who cares to listen to arguments of justification. The second response shares the belief that the Humanities should no longer ground its defenses on the establishment of Truth; rather, we should embrace the Socratic tradition as a process of rattling

the cages of complacency that hinder our citizens' potential to engage the world in intentional and reflective ways—all with no guarantee that we will see significant immediate results. The third response builds upon the second. It affirms specific Stoic-Socratic practices that work effectively with cynical students who yet ironically confess a need to think philosophically about their worlds and lives.

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