

## **BRINGING PHILOSOPHY TO LIFE**

### **BPTL #24: The End of Education**

The topic of education emerged in the news several times during the first year of this series, and it continues to raise important philosophical questions for our present and future life. At the end of the first episode of 2024 (#23), I promised to continue examining that topic by looking at the recent turmoil at some of our major universities that resulted in the resignation of Harvard University President Claudine Gay (January 2, 2024) and that of Liz Magill, president of the University of Pennsylvania (December 9, 2023). Both Gay and Magill had appeared before a U. S. congressional hearing in which they testified concerning campus protests related to the current Israeli/Hamas war. Sally Kornbluth, the president of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had also appeared before that committee, but she remains in office. All three were summoned to appear before a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives and were interrogated by Elise Stefanik, a conservative Republican who represents New York's 21<sup>st</sup> district. The questioning by Representative Stefanik was obviously political in nature, showing the degree to which colleges and universities in the United States are entangled in the political process.

According to *The Associated Press* on January 2, 2024, a major failure in President Gay's performance before the House committee is that she "was unable to

say unequivocally that calls on campus for the genocide of Jews would violate the school's conduct policy.”

Dara Horn, who was a member of President Gay's anti-Semitism advisory committee that was convened after the October 7 Hamas massacre in Israel and amid student responses to it, published an article in *The Atlantic* titled “Why the Most Educated People in America Fall for Anti-Semitic Lies.” Horn says that she was asked to participate in the anti-Semitism advisory committee because she is a Harvard alumna who wrote a book about anti-Semitism called *People Love Dead Jews*. In *The Atlantic* article, she strongly supports the view that the central problem at Harvard was the lack of effective policies internal to the university rather than political attacks from the outside. Based on research for her book, she contends that there is a powerful wave of anti-Semitism in the United States that is real and destructive. She proposes the following solution:

It is fairly obvious what Harvard and other universities would need to do to turn this tide. None of it involves banning slogans or curtailing free speech. Instead it involves things like enforcing existing codes of conduct regarding harassment; protecting classroom buildings, libraries, and dining halls as zones free from advocacy campaigns (similar to rules for polling places); tracking and rejecting funding from entities supporting federally designated terror groups (a topic raised in recent congressional testimony regarding numerous American universities); gut-renovating diversity bureaucracies to address their obvious failure to tackle anti-Semitism; investigating and exposing the academic limitations of courses and programs premised on anti-Semitic lies; and expanding opportunities for students to understand Israeli and Jewish history and to engage with ideas and with one another. There are many ways to advocate for Israeli and Palestinian coexistence that honor the dignity and legitimacy of both indigenous groups and the need to build a

shared future. The restoration of such a model of civil discourse, which has been decimated by heckling and harassment, would be a boon to all of higher education (Dara Horn, *The Atlantic*, February 15, 2024).

Colleges and universities are currently being used as the battleground for the so-called “culture wars” that are being fought over the content of the curriculum, the political affiliations of the faculty, and which books and other media should be available in the library. To do their proper work and fulfill their major role in human culture, educational institutions need to be free from political pressure and allowed to follow all subject matter that is relevant to academic inquiry. The principle of academic freedom is essential to the very existence of educational institutions at any level, which means it should not be directed by politics.

The importance of this principle is far from new. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Galileo was silenced by officials of the Roman Catholic Church who controlled the form and content of the educational system, determined who did the teaching, and what research was permitted. Galileo’s research in astronomy contradicted the scriptures as the Church interpreted them, and he was prohibited from writing about and teaching what he discovered. Charles Darwin, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also published views formed through scientific inquiry that conflicted with the religious world view of his day. He published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, but it was the Scopes Trial in 1925 that placed this issue directly in the world of education. A high school teacher in the state of Tennessee, John Scopes, was accused of violating a law that forbid the

teaching of human evolution in any school funded by the state. That case led to subsequent trials that have secured academic freedom for teachers like Scopes. The separation of church and state that is embedded in the U.S. Constitution helps avoid such conflict, but even that principle is being questioned by proponents of so-called “illiberal democracy” such as Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, and evangelical Christians in the United States who advocate a version that is also called “Christian democracy.”

The struggle for people engaged in scientific research and teaching continues. On February 9, 2024, *The Guardian* reported that Michael Mann, a climate scientist from the United States, was awarded \$1 million in a defamation lawsuit related to his research and publication. Mann brought the lawsuit against “two conservative writers who compared his depictions of global heating to the work of a convicted child molester. The case, which began 12 years ago, is a victory for academic freedom. One of his lawyers put it this way: “Today’s verdict vindicates Mike Mann’s good name and reputation. It also is a big victory for truth and scientists everywhere who dedicate their lives answering vital scientific questions impacting human health and the planet.” The political disagreements over how to interpret and evaluate this issue are well-known, but the prior question concerns the truth about climate change. That topic must first be explored by scientists who are free to inquire and reason without being intimidated by defamation, death threats, and blackmail.

The political process cannot be totally separated from educational practice, but, in a true democracy, education comes to an end without academic freedom. The word “end” has another meaning: goal. What should be the goal or purpose of education in a democracy? Unlike theocracy that prevails in Iran and the Vatican or the totalitarianism that exists in Russia, China, and North Korea; in a democracy teachers, researchers, and writers seek the truth in all realms of human activity and strive to share it with everyone. Democracy depends on universal education with academic freedom for teachers, researchers, and students. Education should be separated from partisan politics to the extent that is possible, however the most serious threat to the educational process does not come from politicians like Representative Stefanik and Governor DeSantis but from current practice within the educational system.

I began teaching full-time at the college level in 1965 during an era when political activity made it difficult to remain in the Ivory Tower and ignore events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis; the Vietnam War; and the assassinations of Jack Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. In the late 1960s, the Vietnam War sparked protests, “teach-ins,” riots, and even military presence that resulted in the death of four students at Kent State University in 1970. Fifty years later, the practice of using college and university campuses for political protest and action continues, as is clear from the recent events at Harvard and Penn. But it is

important remember that these protests and verbal attacks are not limited to right-wing extremists in Florida to. The DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) movement from the progressive end of the political spectrum also spawned threats to academic freedom on several college and university campuses. The goal of education, especially at the secondary level and beyond, is to nurture a rational process that can examine and evaluate claims to truth and value. The academic world, unlike organizations and institutions dedicated to indoctrination and propaganda, welcomes diverse points of view.

Currently, it is fashionable for colleges to distinguish between teaching “what to think” and “how to think,” but in a recent article in *The Atlantic* magazine Caitlin Flanagan contends that this approach is deceptive. She describes a college tour at on a campus in which the guide boasts of their **unique** approach dedicated to teaching students how to think. When Flanagan visited a competing campus, she heard a guide say that “what’s different about College Y ... is that our professors don’t teach us what to think; they teach us *how* to think.” Flanagan concludes: Each of the guides seems to think this is a point of difference about his or her college, which is itself a sign that they have spent a lot more time in the “what to think” school of higher education than in the “how to think” one.... The truth of the matter is that no one can teach you how to think, but what they can do is teach you how to think for

yourself (Caitlin Flanagan, “Colleges Are Lying to Their Students,” *The Atlantic*, 2/2/24).

Being able to think for yourself essentially means not only that one has an opinion but, even more important, that one can explain and justify that opinion with good reasons and sound arguments. Caitlin Flanagan explains what it means to “think for yourself” with a story about an exchange with her father, an academic and a writer. Whenever she made a passionate argument in favor of a topic, he would ask: “And what is the best argument on the other side?” As I explained in episode #4, the 19<sup>th</sup> century British philosopher and logician, John Stuart Mill, in his essay *On Liberty* made that same point, insisting that rather than silencing or ignoring contrary opinions it is crucial to articulate and examine them. The current controversy about what rhetoric should be allowed or prohibited in educational contexts about the Israeli/Hamas war is not primarily a political issue but a matter of policy concerning academic freedom, which transcends politics. When teaching and research are determined by partisan politics, the primary mission of the academy is destroyed. Protests, teach-ins, speeches, debates, and works of visual and performing art are all welcome, but they must be monitored and regulated to assure that they remain within the bounds of fairness and respect. That is the responsibility of the administration, not politicians, law enforcement officials, alumni, or any other external agents. Administrators who fail to carry out this responsibility can and

should be sanctioned, but that should happen within the institution. Appropriate rules and regulations are needed, but preserving academic freedom for all is essential.

The idea that what is important in education is learning “how to think for yourself” takes us once again to Plato’s Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. What Plato did in his dialogues is precisely this process of showing us how to think for ourselves. This is the aim of dialectic, the logical process that Plato nurtured through his dialogues. As I said toward the end of episode #23, this application of the so-called “Socratic method” is Plato’s development of the basic insight he learned from Socrates in the Agora. Platonic dialogue, which promotes independent thinking, employs the form of logic called “dialectic.” This idea is explained and expanded in an essay titled “Why Dialogue.” It can be downloaded for free from the “Document Archives” menu that can be found by this link to the Agora Publications website: <https://www.agorapublications.com/why-dialogue.html>.

When I say that the real crisis in education comes “from current practice within the educational system” rather than from partisan politics, I mean that what should be the highest priority has been supplanted by other goals. In an essay “Reason and the Art of Life,” written ten years ago, I stated that problem this way:

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, science and technology took center stage as the custodians of reason. The arts and the humanities were sent to central casting and summoned when the script called for a bit of comic relief or to provide a pleasant interlude between the acts. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century things have become even worse for the humanities, as is clear from a 2013 report called “The Heart of the Matter” published by The American Academy of Arts and Sciences. In recent years there has been a severe reduction in funding for the arts and the humanities, the number of tenure-track positions has decreased substantially, and the role



of the humanities in the curriculum has diminished. Priority is now given to STEM courses—Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics—because they create jobs and, above all, contribute to the global economy. The media coverage of this current trend and the response from the academic world largely miss its deeper meaning. To grasp what is happening, we need to go beyond the various economic and political battles and consider the role of reason in promoting the art of life (“Reason and the Art of Life,” p. 2).

I have no objection to teaching STEM courses, which are essential to the practical and professional aspects of human life, however these subjects are primarily concerned with means and techniques, whereas what we need is to analyze and justify goals and purposes. Ten years after that report from The American Academy of Arts and Sciences called “The Heart of the Matter,” our “heart trouble” has become even more severe. The liberal arts continue to languish, especially when measured by the number of tenure track positions in the arts and humanities. The curriculum has not expanded and incorporated the kind of education that helps students learn how to think for themselves about the art of life. That essay begins with a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: “It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity.” One reason things have become worse during past decade is the rapid acceleration and implementation of artificial intelligence, the topic of episodes 14, 15, and 16 of this series, a dramatic expansion of what appalled Einstein.

Rather than more technology and more STEM education, today we urgently need to focus on our humanity. To do that, we need to put the arts and the humanities at the center of the process and make them mandatory for all through secondary

education. How should that be done? That will be the topic of Episode #25. To do that, I suggest we return to Plato's Cave. Here is the beginning of Plato's famous allegory from Book 7 of *The Republic*:

Socrates: Now, Glaucon, let's think about the ignorance of human beings and their education in the form of an allegory. Imagine them living underground in a kind of cave. The mouth of the cave, which is far above, is as wide as the cave itself and opens to the light outside. These people have been here since childhood. Their legs and necks are chained so that they cannot move. They can see only what is in front of them because the chains are fastened in a way that keeps them from turning their heads. A fire burns at some distance behind them. If you look carefully, you can see a wall between the fire and the prisoners, like a curtain that hides puppeteers showing their puppets.

Glaucon: I can see that.

Socrates: Can you also see people passing behind the wall, carrying all kinds of objects above their heads so that they show over the wall? They are carrying statues of humans and animals made of wood, stone, and other materials. Some of them are talking and others are silent.

Glaucon: That's a strange image, Socrates, and these are strange prisoners.

Socrates: They are like us. They see only the shadows the light from the fire throws on the wall of the cave in front of them—their own shadows or those of the objects passing behind the wall. Do you think they could actually see themselves?

Glaucon: How could they see anything but shadows if they are unable to move their heads?

Socrates: And what about the objects being carried by the people behind the wall?

Glaucon: They would see only the shadows.

Socrates: If the prisoners were able to talk with each other about these shadows, wouldn't they believe that they were discussing reality?

Glaucon: That's right. Socrates: Suppose sounds echoed off the wall of the cave. Wouldn't the prisoners imagine that what they heard came from one of the shadows?

Glaucon: No doubt.

Socrates: So, it's obvious that for these prisoners the truth would be no more than the shadows of objects.

Glaucon: That seems to be inevitable.

Socrates: Now let's consider how they might be released and cured of their ignorance (*Plato's Republic*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, revised by Albert A. Anderson, Agora Publications, 2001, Greek pages 514-515).