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A PHILOSOPHICAL CALL TO RENEW AMERICAN CULTURE: *THE HOMESCHOOL RENAISSANCE*

Peter A. Redpath, Ph.D.

TODAY, NATIONALLY AND GLOBALLY, America is at a crossroad. We face daunting educational and political problems. No social order born of a common conviction in the truth and goodness of its principles can long survive when it cannot rationally justify this conviction. At this historical moment, a critical meltdown is occurring in American educational and political institutions because, increasingly, the general American population and our institutional leaders cannot rationally justify the truth and goodness of the principles upon which our American educational and political institutions depend for their survival and health.

During the twentieth century, totalitarian political systems externally threatened the American democratic concept. In the face of these systems, America generally defended itself through a combination of physical force, free market competition, pragmatic arguments about the superiority of the American way of life, and the moral conviction of the American people about the just nature of their cause and the goodness of their society. At this time in our history, while we still have external enemies, America faces another, more pernicious, internal threat, that we cannot defeat through physical force, the free market, or pragmatic slogans about the superiority of the American way of life: the inability rationally to justify the truth and moral goodness of American society.

Educationally, sophistry reigns supreme in America today. Since 1983, millions of Americans have reached high school senior year without learning the basics of reading, mathematics, and U.S. history. Millions of teenagers have dropped out of high school.[1] Today, an average student, even at better American colleges and universities, cannot think abstractly or read a difficult book without individual proctoring.[2] Many faculty members are illiterate, and, especially in the social sciences, cannot explain the nature of their subject matter, the method their discipline uses, the origin of their principles, or what makes their principles scientific. The State arbitrarily undermines parental authority in favor of “enlightened” social causes. Our public schools cannot teach the philosophical and moral principles that sustain the authority of our political institutions. These schools are crime-ridden. We have reached a point in public education where we cannot agree on curricula, especially in areas of history, ethics, and politics. We are graduating increasing numbers of illiterate students, often warehoused for years by incompetent teachers. Yet our most successful politicians tend to graduate from, and send their children to, private schools.

In politics, we increasingly remove moral principles and truth from the domain of public life. Irrationally and sophistically, we identify the sphere of public life with the secular realm, and justice with the domain of the Machiavellian will-of-the-stronger. Often we judge deceit, selfishness, and subordination of the common good in order to win political office, as hallmarks of wisdom.

States come into being through, are the creation of, other mediating institutions, like families, churches, synagogues, schools, private businesses, and so on. Collections of individuals do not found States as collective wills to which we become serfs. Through representatives, people, as social beings (with skills and factional inter-

ests), and as moral agents (with natural rights and duties), and members of communities, establish States as limited, mediating agencies, through which we self-govern ourselves in pursuit of our common good: the more perfect union we achieve through political peace and justice.

The notion of limited government did not begin with modernity or the European Enlightenment. Moses adhered to this principle in his dealings with Pharaoh. The ancient Greeks recognized this principle in their articulation of the four cardinal moral virtues: prudence, justice, temperance, and courage. And St. Thomas Aquinas, referring to St. Augustine, explicitly appeals to this principle in his treatment of the variety of human law in Question 91 of I-II of his Summa Theologiae. [3]

Principally and primarily, the State is a peace officer, not a parent, nurturer, clothier, guardian, educator, nor chief economist.

The proper subject of State governance is human freedom. States exist because human freedom exists. States exist to regulate human freedom within the bounds of justice and State competence in order to promote the common good of civic peace and friendship. States exist principally and primarily to regulate human freedom in relation to human exchanges, to maintain peace and order within these exchanges. They do not exist principally and primarily to establish and operate schools, or to run motels, real estate agencies, businesses, hospitals, or restaurants. [4]

States come into being because we human beings have a natural desire, and a moral obligation, to pursue our own happiness through exercise of our choices. To pursue our happiness, we must exercise our freedom. To exercise freedom, we need conducive circumstances. The State exists principally and primarily as a peace officer to facilitate the circumstances under which we can justly exercise our political freedom. [5]

Freedom is proper to man's nature. In our actions, we have a moral right to exercise our freedom virtuously relative to our personal welfare, and a political right to exercise it justly relative to the common good.

The principal right to reward people for virtue and punish them for vice lies with God, not individual human beings, or the State. Hence, in our dealings with others, we have to be cautious not to overstep the bounds of our moral authority. God has the moral

authority to command and reward all acts of virtue and to punish all vice. Individual human beings do not. God's moral authority prohibits all human evils. Individual moral authority only extends to communities over which individuals can exercise competent judgment and influence. For human beings, the domain of any moral authority is always the sphere of the humanly possible relative to some human good. No one, including States or God, has a right to command the impossible, which is what States do when they over-extend their authority.

As parents, we cannot outlaw all wrongdoing by our children, and we cannot justly command of them impossible acts of virtue. As human beings, children have a right to exercise their freedom within the bounds of justice and household peace. When they overstep these bounds parents have a moral right to punish them.

Similarly, in the political domain, private morality is the dimension of human freedom related to the pursuit of personal welfare, inasmuch as this has no detrimental impact on civic peace and friendship. From a political perspective, in our private lives, we have a moral jurisdiction that allows us to be as intemperate, cowardly, foolish, and unjust as we please in our dealings with others, until our actions start to undermine civic peace and friendship. The domain of public morality, from which we derive our public moral principles, should not be merely the dimension of secular behavior—the arena of a public secular religion, where only secular reason has a right to speak and where truth is measured by an “enlightened” intellectual elite and governmental bureaucrats. [6]

While many people derive their moral principles from religion, others do not. Many people, such as atheists and agnostics, derive their moral principles from personal experience at living, from tradition, or from philosophy. Other people derive their moral principles from revelation. To demand that such people adopt a secular religion before they can enter political debate that involves a common good to which they contribute and common threats by which they are endangered violates human and Constitutional rights to freedom for religion and speech.

Essentially, morality has two domains: our duties toward other people and our duties toward God. Religion is a moral obligation we have toward God. As such, it presupposes, it does not essentially generate, moral principles. God, not religion, is the source of moral principles. God imbeds these principles in human nature, in the voice of conscience, and freely gives this voice to theists, athe-

ists, and agnostics. Religion arises as a reaction in some people to the voice of conscience. The voice of conscience does not arise as an act of religion.

To claim that religion, not God, is essentially the source of morality is a major fallacy of the Enlightenment. It implies that atheists and agnostics are essentially devoid of conscience, are not moral agents, an assertion contradicted by much historical experience. Submission of conscience to the rule of justice imbedded in human inclinations authorizes citizens to have a public voice. This rule of justice relative to the common good, not submission to a secular religion, generates the authority of civil law. The rule of justice relative to the common good, not submission to a secular religion, is the standard of political tolerance. To demand that our right to participate in public moral discourse rests upon adoption of a secular religion and its secularized rules of tolerance violates natural human rights, the American Constitution, and American pluralism.

Public morality is the domain of freedom involving personal exchanges that impact on the common good of civic peace and friendship: the domain of civic justice and public safety. As soon as a human action enters this arena, it passes from morally private to morally public jurisdiction, the arena of public safety regulable by just, not unlimited, tolerance. In this arena, all citizens have a right to a public voice. In this domain, moral responsibility and irresponsibility impact on all citizens regardless of religious or non-religious affiliation. In this arena, the domain of justice and freedom, where human actions impact upon our common good and threaten us with common dangers:

(1) all human beings, by natural possession of a conscience, are competent judges and have a natural right to speak; and,

(2) justice, relative to the common good, establishes the limits of tolerance. Here, the voice of conscience, philosophy, personal experience, and religious traditions all have something to contribute.

Philosophy and the Common Good

For several decades, through increasing identification of the State with the Body Politic, and sophistic appeal to the secularly religious grounds of the State's public morality, we have steadily diminished parental authority over the education of children and decreased the public voice of ordinary citizens, religious leaders, and classical philosophers in political debates that affect our common

good and public welfare. The net result of this effort has been an increasing erosion of American educational and political institutions.

Like every constitutional political order, American society came into being through a conventional agreement made by representatives of political factions to unite in the pursuit of a common political good, a more perfect political union. The American government did not create this political vision of the common good. The government's existence presupposed, and arose from, this common goal articulated in the Constitution. The American government exists to preserve, protect, and defend this common good and the principles that sustain it.

The American vision of the common good is historically rooted in Western philosophical and theological convictions about human nature and destiny that the American founders considered to be self-evident. Without familiarity with these convictions, we cannot grasp the nature or meaning of our political institutions and political lives.

We become like strangers wandering amidst foreign and unfamiliar surroundings. We erroneously start to believe that our own self-definition grounds our freedom and political principles.

Central to the Western vision of the common good is a philosophical conviction about the fundamental rationality and dignity of human nature and the theological conviction that human life is guided by a providential creator. The major ancient Greek philosophers never deviated in their judgment that our universe is an intelligible order inhabited by a gradation of beings, each with its own non-relative identity, culminating in human nature, a social animal endowed with the faculty to reason.

The ancient Greek philosophers thought we were born with the natural ability to survey the physical world around us and to extract from our everyday observations of the behavior of physical things the rules whereby we develop our arts, sciences, morals, law, and politics. For these philosophers, inclinations in this organic faculty of reason, whereby we moderate our use of freedom in pursuit of our own welfare and act with reasonable tolerance toward others, constitute the voice of reason - conscience - the locus of the universal moral principles that determine moral normalcy. They thought that to ignore, or to behave contrary to, reason's dic-

tates was vicious, made us less human and more beastly, and eventually led to our emotional, intellectual, and social corruption.[7]

Medieval Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thinkers inherited and preserved the Greek philosophical view of nature, the arts, and sciences, and built around them our Western cultural, educational, theological, legal, and political traditions. For several centuries, but especially within the past several decades, the ancient Greek understanding of philosophy and human nature has decreased in some of these traditions. Wherever this has occurred, disaster has resulted. Philosophy is the only rational knowledge by which we can judge the principles of demonstration in our arts and sciences, evaluate the worth of our knowledge, identify and evaluate our criteria of truth, distinguish sound from unsound arguments, and unify our sciences into an order of higher learning. And philosophical reflection upon the behavior of human beings, understood as rational animals, is the only means we have to establish a rationally justified ethics and a concept of the person that can sustain democratic government.

Democratic government presupposes a specific vision of the common human good. And our concept of a common human good necessarily contains our concept of human nature. Democratic government is a type of government naturally best suited for achieving the common good of rational animals, not of irrational animals or angels. Totalitarianism suits beasts. Theocracy befits angels.

At present, we Americans find ourselves in a state of educational and political decay because we have lost our understanding of the nature of classical philosophy and the essential role it plays in integrating all our branches of knowledge, our cultural and political institutions, in justifying our common vision of our common political good, and rationally articulating the jurisdictional lines of private and public morality. Having lost our understanding of the nature of this subject, we can no longer find rational arguments to justify and sustain our different educational and religious institutions and the principles that sustain us in our common convictions about our common good. The existence of these institutions essentially depends upon, and can only be rationally justified by, philosophical arguments that presuppose that we are rational animals. Having lost this conviction, we have lost our ability to think philosophically. Thus, we can no longer rationally justify American culture.

Transmission of the principles that justify a culture's vision of the common good is the work of theologians and philosophers. Ameri-

can culture is theologically pluralistic. For this reason alone, it can never theologically justify a unified vision of the democratic common good to its own people, much less to people of different theological traditions who would attack America externally.

Since its inception, America has attempted to use a lowest common biblical tradition as a kind of public philosophy to justify the intellectual and moral norms that sustain our common democratic vision. Given the common Judeo-Christian and European tradition of previous generations of Americans, rhetorical appeal to such a common theological tradition was possible to sustain our way of life. Growing American pluralism and secularization no longer make this possible. Having weakened our theological traditions, we largely only have sophistry, empty slogans, to justify our cultural, educational, and political institutions. No democracy can rationally sustain itself on sophistic principles. For this reason, our schools have lost their ability to teach, our universities are gradually being transformed into propaganda institutes, and our politicians increasingly think that words mean whatever they want them to mean.

Philosophy is not a lowest common theology, a secular religion from which we get our public morality, or any specific system or body of knowledge. It is a method of rational investigation that involves use of sense observation, abstract conceptualization, and logical reasoning, a natural mode of higher level inquiry employed by human beings, rational animals. This understanding of human nature and philosophy is common to our Western theological traditions and to ordinary human beings in all parts of the world. And it was the general understanding that prevailed in the West when universities first arose during the Middle Ages.



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Some Immediate Steps to Take

Universities are the main source from which America draws its institutional leaders. If America's universities are intellectually and morally weak, American institutions will not long remain intellectually and morally strong. America's universities are intellectually and morally weak. Hence, American institutions cannot long remain intellectually and morally strong.

Currently, philosophy is required at perhaps, no more than twenty-five percent of American colleges and universities. Even at those schools that require philosophy, what passes for philosophy is often sophistry, having little resemblance to the mode of abstract reasoning that the ancient Greeks considered to be natural to rational animals. The decline of classical philosophy at our universities helps explain the widespread inability of contemporary American college students to think abstractly, reason logically, maintain their attention span, distinguish sound from fallacious arguments, and read difficult books.

A morally vicious and intellectually gullible citizenry cannot sustain democratic government. Loss of our ability to reason well corrupts our democratic institutions, places them in the hands of sophists, and makes us dupes to the persuasive force of ideological slogans and sound bites. We cannot turn to contemporary social scientists, psychologists, political and cultural theorists, literary critics, or contemporary philosophers to remedy our current educational, cultural, and political problems. Generally, their theories are the sophistry that lie at the source of our decay. To seek help from them resembles asking incendiaries to fight a forest fire.[8]

To renew our nation, we must renew our institutions. To renew our institutions, we must renew our universities. To renew our universities, we need a renaissance of classical philosophical and theological education, from the ground up as well as from the top down. The huge and growing "homeschooling" movement presents an opportunity to initiate this classical philosophical and theological educational renaissance, starting in the elementary and secondary levels and then reaching into the colleges and universities.

Homeschoolers heavily favor those colleges where classical philosophical and theological education still exists (for example, the student body of Thomas Aquinas College is now about 30%

homeschooled). These colleges, especially those with a component of traditional theology, are rapidly expanding. Homeschooling is increasing at a rate of approximately 15% per year. Already, competition for these students is exerting tremendous pressure on college administrations to hire faculty and alter their curricula in that direction. This trend will doubtlessly increase.

Many universities, which previously shunned homeschoolers, now actively recruit them. New colleges geared toward homeschoolers and their traditional and classical yearnings are already on the drawing boards (for example, Patrick Henry College, The Great Books University College, Yorktown University). We need to encourage this trend.

Western culture and theological traditions inherited their philosophical principles from the ancient Greek conviction that the world is intelligible to unaided natural reason and that the highest form of human education lies in becoming an independent learner. The Delphic oracle's prescription to "know thyself" captures the motivating principle behind the ancient Greek pursuit of philosophy. As Socrates well understood, principally and primarily, all learning is self-teaching.

To become highly educated, we must facilitate this self-teaching through apprenticeship with great discoverers (of being, truth, unity, goodness, and beauty) and tutoring from masters of the liberal arts of learning: those people who can challenge us to develop the discipline whereby we can acquire the principles for reading great books. In this way, we can enter into conversation with the great discoverers, most of whom are long dead. Hopefully, through life-long conversation with these great intellects, we can ourselves become independent learners and great discoverers, and can pass on to posterity the principles that sustain our culture, those discovered and taught by the great discoverers and teachers of the past and set down in their great books, including Scriptural texts.


Unhappily, public, and most private, education in the United States today inverts the classical order of learning. Our public and private educational systems have lost the Greek understanding that the first and most essential teacher is the student, next comes the great discoverer, and last comes the classroom teacher, whose main task should be to help students learn the liberal art of reading difficult classic books. It should not be to masquerade as a great discoverer oneself. As Mortimer J. Adler is fond of saying, "A classroom teacher is only a better student."

Homeschooling, as most homeschooled students soon discover, is, after the first few years of coaching in the liberal arts (which are best taught one-on-one—hence at home), very largely self-teaching. If we equate self-teaching with the current practical expression of that concept, homeschooling, we can see that the ancient Greeks well understood what our culture is being forced to concede reluctantly: all learning is essentially self-teaching. The superior academic performance of homeschoolers, now widely known and admitted, provides objective evidence of this fact. We best encourage and support self-teaching by preparing students for, and guiding them to, the classic works of the great discoverers, at home, close to the loving arms of parents, who are more likely to be able to give them the one-to-one tutoring attention that professional educators constantly tell us is essential to maximizing student achievement.

Genuine higher education (in the sense of developing the higher intellectual virtues such as understanding and wisdom, and not just the memory) begins when we start to take control over our self-teaching, when we no longer need an auxiliary teacher's help to discover the principles by which to learn. Contemporary public and private educational systems largely invert and undermine this classical view of learning and higher education. While they often give lip-service to developing independent learners, and one-to-one tutoring, the educational practices they employ actually do the opposite: cripple the ability of students to think abstractly and become self-teachers.

Our educational institutions have largely abolished the Socratic method of using discussions and disputations among student-learners to encourage abstract thinking and deepen understanding of difficult and lofty concepts, traditionally called the "Great Ideas." Thus, secondary educational institutions neglect the one area that might be especially helpful to us for promoting abstract thought, higher education, and independent learning. More than any other institutions, our contemporary public and private educational systems sustain and propagate the sophistic educational mindset that has undermined the Greek educational vision that, for centuries, has supported Western culture and our democratic republic. To overturn this mindset, we must restore the classical view that learning is chiefly accomplished by homeschooling (that is, self-teaching) with the help of the great discoverers.

At this juncture in American history, homeschooling (especially classical homeschooling, leading to the study of Western civiliza-

tion's great books), and efforts to develop ways to support the secondary liberal education of homeschoolers (including the organization of Socratic discussion groups) is one of our best hopes to halt our culture's decline. These homeschoolers now stream into our universities. Soon they will flood them. In my opinion, this is the irrepressible wave of the future. This Homeschool Renaissance may well be the West's last, large-scale, educational reform movement, and so our nation's best practical hope to halt what others have called this twilight of civilization from fading into another Dark Age of ignorance and chaos. 

Notes

1. *A Nation at Risk*, in *Policy Review*, 90 (July/August 1998) 23-24.
2. Mortimer J. Adler noted this problem as far back as 1940. See Mortimer J. Adler, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education*, New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1940) 11.
3. Peter A. Redpath, *What's Wrong with Government Schools?*, in *Social Justice Review* 89 (November/December, 1998) no. 11-12, 164. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 91, a.4, respondeo. See, also, Plato, *Republic*, Bk. 1, 334C-354B, and *Gorgias*, 491D-500D.
4. Redpath, *What's Wrong with Government Schools?*, 164.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Peter A. Redpath, *Private Morality and Public Enforcement*, in Curtis L. Hancock and Anthony O. Simon, eds., *Freedom, Virtue, and the Common Good* (Notre Dame, Ind.: American Maritain Association, distributed by University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) pgs. 332-341.
7. Etienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965) 272-293. Peter A. Redpath, *The New World Disorder: A Crisis of Philosophical Identity*, in *Contemporary Philosophy*, 16 (November/December 1994) no. 6, 19-24.
8. Peter A. Redpath, *Dirty Dancing: Higher Education as Enlightened Swindling*, in Peter A. Redpath, *Masquerade of the Dream*

Walkers: Prophetic Theology from the Cartesians to Hegel (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Editions Rodopi, B.V., 1998). I thank Curtis L. Hancock for calling my attention to this simile.



Dr. Redpath is a Full Professor of Philosophy at St. John's University; has received numerous awards and honors for his work in philosophy; was appointed to the Board of Trustees of the Institute for Advanced Philosophical Research in 1988; has made over 70 public program appearances on philosophical topics; has authored numerous books, monographs, and published articles; and has edited two philosophy books. He is a member of the Board of Editors of Editions Rodopi. Dr. Redpath is a Director of The Great Books Academy and Chairman of The Angelicum Academy. <http://www.angelicum.net/>

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

The American Center officially opened last week with a reception attended by over 150 people. We got good coverage in all the papers and on Lao TV, and have had about 100 visitors a day since then. We have over 1,000 books, among them 12 Adler books, plus the videos. We'll soon be holding weekly programs, including video showings, book discussions, and so on. One of those programs will focus on Mortimer Adler, and his contributions to American thought and life. We'll set up a special display of the books and videos we have, and send you a picture of them when we do. We'll also perhaps hand out in advance of the evening a short article by Adler, and hold a discussion about it. More on this as it develops. . .

James A. Warren
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