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Raphael, School of Athens, fresco, 1509-1511

WHY WE SHOULD STUDY THE HISTORY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

From
Intercollegiate Studies Institute

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*Understanding our cultural and national problems
requires grappling with Western history.*

Over the years I have gotten into trouble more than a few times for things I have written or said in public, but I suppose the chief cause of my notoriety is a speech I gave to the freshmen of Yale College suggesting that they would be wise to make the study of Western civilization the center of their pursuit of a liberal education. In that speech I focused on our needs as Americans. I pointed out the devastating effects of ethnic conflict and disunity around the world and the special problems and opportunities con-

fronting the United States, a country that was never a nation in the sense of resting on common ancestry but one that depends on a set of beliefs and institutions deriving from Western traditions. I argued that the unity of our country and the defense of its political freedom and individual liberties required that its citizens have a good understanding of the ideas, history, and traditions that created them.

The debate that followed my talk revealed a broad and deep ignorance of the historical process by which the very values that encourage current criticisms of the Western experience came into being, taking them for granted, without comprehending their Western roots and their fragility even within the Western tradition. It does not seem to be understood, for instance, that the very idea of a liberal education is uniquely a product of the Western experience, as is the institution of the university in which it has developed.

But the value of studying the Western experience goes far beyond the needs of Americans. No fair-minded person can deny that, whatever its other characteristics, the West has created institutions of government and law that provide unprecedented freedom for its people and a body of natural scientific knowledge and technological achievement that together make possible a level of health and material prosperity undreamed of in earlier times and unknown outside the West and the areas it has influenced. I think V. S. Naipaul, born in Trinidad of Indian parents, is right to speak of the modern world as “our universal civilization” shaped chiefly by the West. Most people around the world who know of them want to benefit from the achievements of Western science and technology. Increasingly, they also want to participate in its political freedom. The evidence suggests, moreover, that a society cannot achieve the full benefits of Western science and technology without a commitment to reason and objectivity as essential to knowledge and to the political freedom that sustains it and helps it move forward. The primacy of reason and the pursuit of objectivity, therefore, both characteristic of the Western experience, seem to be essential for the achievement of the desired goals anywhere in the world.

The civilization of the West, however, was not the result of some inevitable process through which other cultures will automatically pass. It emerged from a unique history in which chance and accident often played a vital part. The institutions and ideas, therefore, that provide for freedom and improvement in the material conditions of life can not take root and flourish without an understanding of how they came about and what challenges they have had to surmount. Non-Western people who wish to share in the things

that characterize modernity will need to study the ideas and history of Western civilization to achieve what they want, and Westerners who wish to preserve them must do the same.

The many civilizations adopted by the human race have shared basic characteristics. Most have tended toward cultural uniformity and stability; reason, though employed for all sorts of practical and intellectual purposes in some of these cultures, lacked independence from religion and the high status to challenge the most basic received ideas; the standard form of government has been monarchy; outside the West, republics have been unknown; rulers have been thought to be divine or the appointed spokesmen for divinity; religious and political institutions and beliefs have been thoroughly intertwined in a mutually supportive unified structure; government has not been subject to secular, reasoned analysis; it has rested on religious authority, tradition, and power; the concept of individual freedom has had no importance.

The first and sharpest break with this common human experience came in ancient Greece. The Greek city-states were republics. Differences in wealth among their citizens were relatively small. There were no kings with the wealth to hire mercenary soldiers, so the citizens did their own fighting. As independent defenders of the common safety and interest, they demanded a role in the most important political decisions; in this way, for the first time, political life came to be shared by a relatively large portion of the people, and participation in political life was highly valued.

Such states needed no bureaucracy, for there were no vast royal or state holdings that needed management and not much economic surplus to support a bureaucratic class. There was no separate caste of priests and little concern with life after death. In this varied, dynamic, secular, and remarkably free context there arose for the first time a speculative natural philosophy based on observation and reason, the root of modern natural science and of philosophy, free to investigate or ignore divinity.

What most sets the Greeks apart is their view of the world. Where other peoples have seen sameness and continuity, the Greeks and the heirs of their way of thinking have tended to notice disjunctions and to make distinctions. The Greek way of looking at things requires a change from the use of faith, poetry, and intuition to a reliance on reason. It permits a continuing rational inquiry into the nature of reality; unlike mystical insights, scientific theories cannot be arrived at by meditation alone but require accurate observations of the world and reasoning of a kind that other human beings can

criticize, analyze, modify, and correct. That was the beginning of the liberation and enthronement of reason, to whose searching examination the Greeks thereafter exposed everything they perceived—natural, human, and divine.

From the time they formed their republics until they were conquered by alien empires, the Greeks also rejected monarchy of any kind. They thought that a human being functioning in his full capacity must live as a free man in an autonomous polis ruled by laws that were the product of the political community and not of an arbitrary fiat from some man or god. These are ideas about law and justice that have not flourished outside the Western tradition.

The Greeks, however, combined a unique sense of mankind's high place in the natural order and the possibilities it provided with a painful understanding of its limitations. This is the tragic vision of the human condition that characterized classical Greek civilization. To cope with it, they urged human beings to restrain their over-arching ambitions. Inscribed at Apollo's temple at Delphi were the slogans "Know thyself" and "Nothing in excess," meaning "know your own limitations as a fallible mortal and exercise moderation." Beyond these exhortations, they relied on a good political regime to enable human beings to fulfill the capacities that were part of their nature, to train them in virtue and restrain them from vice. Aristotle made the point neatly:

As man is the best of the animals when perfected, so he is the worst when separated from law and justice. For injustice is most dangerous when it is armed, and man, armed by nature with good sense and virtue, may use them for entirely opposite ends. Therefore, when he is without virtue man is the most unscrupulous and savage of the animals . . .

The justice needed to control this dark side of human nature can be found only in a well-ordered society of free people who govern themselves.

The second great strand in the history of the West is the Judeo-Christian tradition. Christianity's main roots were in Judaism, a religion that worshiped a single, all-powerful deity who is sharply separated from human beings, makes great moral demands upon them, and judges them all, even kings and emperors. Christianity began as a persecuted religion that captured the Roman Empire only after centuries of hostility, and it never entirely lost its original character as an insurgent movement, independent of the state and hostile to it, making claims that challenged the secular authority.

The union of a universalist religion with a monarch such as the Roman emperor, who ruled a vast empire could, nevertheless, have put an end to any prospect of freedom, as in other civilizations, but Christianity's inheritance of the rational, disputatious Greek philosophy led to powerfully divisive quarrels about the nature of god and other theological questions, in the tradition of Greek philosophical debate.

The barbarians' destruction of the western empire also destroyed the power of the emperors and their efforts to impose religious and political conformity under imperial control. Here we arrive at a second sharp break with the general experience of mankind. The west of the Germanic tribes that had toppled the Roman Empire was weak and divided. The barriers to unity presented by European geography and limited technology made it hard for a would-be conqueror to create a vast empire, eliminating competitors and imposing his will over vast areas. These conditions permitted the development of institutions and habits needed for freedom, even as they also made Europe vulnerable to conquest and extinction.

The Christian church might have stepped into the breach and imposed obedience and uniformity, but the church never gained enough power to control the state. Strong enough to interfere with the ambitions of emperors and kings, it never could impose its own domination. Nobody sought or planned for freedom, but in the spaces left by the endless conflicts among secular rulers, and between them and the church, there was room for freedom to grow.

Into some of that space towns and cities reappeared, and with them new supports for freedom. Taking advantage of the rivalries mentioned above, they obtained charters from the local powers establishing their right to conduct their own affairs and to govern themselves. In Italy some of these cities were able to gain control of the surrounding country and to become city-states resembling those of ancient Greece. Their autonomy was assisted by the continuing struggle between popes and emperors.

In these states the modern world began to take form. Although the people were Christian, their life and outlook became increasingly secular. Here and in other cities north of the Alps arose a worldview that celebrated the greatness and dignity of mankind. Its vision is revealed with flamboyant confidence by Pico della Mirandola: God told man that

We have made thee neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mor-

tal nor immortal, so that with freedom of choice and with honor, as though the maker and molder of thyself, thou mayest fashion thyself in whatever shape thou shalt prefer. . . . O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most felicity of man! To him it is granted to have whatever he chooses, to be whatever he wills.

This is a remarkable leap beyond the humanism of the Greeks, something new in the world. Man is not merely the measure of all things, as the sophist Protagoras had boldly asserted; he is more than mortal, unlimited by nature, entirely free to shape himself and to acquire whatever he wants. Observe also that it is not his reason that will determine human actions but his will alone, free of the moderating control of reason. Another Florentine, Machiavelli, moved further in the same direction. For him “Fortune is a woman, . . . and it is necessary to hold her down and beat her and fight with her” (*Prince* 25, p. 215), a notion the Greeks would have regarded as dangerously arrogant and certain to produce disaster.

Francis Bacon, influenced by Machiavelli, urged human beings to employ their reason to force nature to give up its secrets, to master nature in order to improve man’s material well-being. He assumed that such a course would lead to progress and the general improvement of the human condition. Such thinking lay at the heart of the scientific revolution and remains the faith on which modern science and technology rest.

Hobbes and Locke applied a similar novelty and modernity to the sphere of politics, basing their understanding on the common passions of man for a comfortable self-preservation and discovering “natural rights” that belong to man either as part of nature or as the gift of a benevolent and reasonable god. Man was seen as a solitary creature, not inherently a part of society, and his basic rights were seen to be absolute, for nothing must interfere with the right of each individual to defend his life, liberty, and property.

Freedom was threatened in early modern times by the emergence of monarchies that might have been able to crush it, but the cause of individual freedom was enhanced by the Protestant Reformation, another upheaval within Christianity arising from its focus on individual salvation, its inheritance of a tradition of penetrating reason applied even to matters of faith, and to the continuing struggle between church and state. The English Revolution came about in large part because of Charles I’s attempt to impose an alien religious conformity, as well as tighter political control, on his kingdom. In England the tradition of freedom and government bound

by law was strong enough to produce effective resistance. From the ensuing rebellion came limited, constitutional, representative government and, ultimately, democracy. The example and the ideas it produced encouraged and informed the French and American revolutions and the entire modern constitutional tradition.

These ideas and institutions are the basis for modern liberal thinking about politics, the individual, and society, just as the confident view of science and technology as progressive forces improving the lot of humanity and increasing man's capacity to understand and control the universe has been the most powerful form taken by the Western elevation of reason. In the last two centuries both these most characteristic elements of Western civilization have come under heavy attack. At different times science and technology have been blamed for the destruction of human community and the alienation of people from nature and from one another, for intensifying the gulf between rich and poor, for threatening the very existence of humanity either by producing weapons of total destruction or by destroying the environment.

At the same time, the foundations of freedom have also come into question. Jefferson and his colleagues could confidently proclaim their political rights as "self-evident" and the gift of a "Creator." By now, however, the power of religion has faded, and for many the basis for a modern political and moral order has been demolished. Nietzsche announced the death of God, and Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor asserted that when God is dead all things are permitted. Nihilism rejects any objective basis for society and its morality, the very concept of objectivity, even the possibility of communication itself, and a vulgar form of nihilism has a remarkable influence in our educational system today, from elementary school through our universities. The consequences of the victory of such ideas would be enormous. If both religion and reason are removed all that remains is will and power, where the only law is that of tooth and claw. There is no protection for the freedom of weaker individuals or those who question the authority of the most powerful. There is no basis for individual rights or for a critique of existing ideas and institutions.

That such attacks on the greatest achievements of the West should be made by Western intellectuals is perfectly in keeping with the Western tradition, yet it seems ironic that they have gained so much currency at the height of the achievements of Western reason in the form of science and at a moment when its concept of political freedom seems to be sweeping all before it. Still, we cannot deny that there is a dark side to the Western experience. To put un-


trammelled reason and individual freedom at the center of a civilization is to live with the conflict, turmoil, instability, and uncertainty that they produce. Freedom was born and has survived in the space created by divisions and conflict within and between nations and religions. We must wonder whether the power of modern weapons will allow it and the world to survive at such a price. Individual freedom, although it has greatly elevated the condition of the people who have lived in free societies, inevitably permits inequalities that are the more galling because each person is plainly free to try to improve his situation and largely responsible for the outcome. Freedom does permit isolation from society and an alienation of the individual at a high cost to both.

Nor are these the only problems posed by the Western tradition in its modern form. Whether it takes the form of the unbridled claims of Pico della Mirandola, of the Nietzschean assertion of the power of the superior individual to transform and shape his own nature, or of the modern totalitarian effort to change the nature of humanity by utopian social engineering, the temptation to arrogance offered by the ideas and worldly success of the modern West threatens its own great traditions and achievements.

Because of Western civilization's emergence as the exemplary civilization, it also presents problems to the whole world. The challenges presented by freedom and the predominance of reason cannot be ignored, nor can they be met by recourse to the experience of other cultures, where these characteristics have not been prominent. To understand and cope with our problems we all need to know and to grapple with the Western experience.

In my view we need especially to examine the older traditions of the West that came before the modern era and to take seriously the possibility that useful wisdom can be found there, especially among the Greeks who began it all. They understood the potentiality of human beings, their limitations, and the predicament in which they live. Man is potent and important, yet he is fallible and mortal, capable of the greatest achievements and the worst crimes. He is a tragic figure, powerful but limited, with freedom to choose and act but bound by his own nature, knowing that he will never achieve perfect knowledge and understanding, justice and happiness, but determined to continue the search.

To me that seems an accurate description of the human condition that is meaningful not only for the Greeks and their heirs in the West but for all human beings. It is an understanding that cannot be achieved without a serious examination of the Western experience.

The abandonment of such a study or its adulteration for current political purposes would be a terrible loss to all of humanity. 

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