

*“Getting It”:
Liberal Education and the
Discouraging Case of Alexander*
John Churchill

It is an honor and a delight to be at Juniata to take part in this celebration of your 126th Commencement. I bring greetings and best wishes to the College from the Phi Beta Kappa Society. On the Society’s behalf, I bring congratulations to all whose hard work, perseverance, intellectual abilities, and devotion to the liberal arts and sciences have earned the degrees conferred today.

You must relish this day; it will be one of your lifelong memories. Remember the look of the campus, these buildings where you have labored with such delight, the friends you will carry with you as you leave, and the faculty who care about you more than you may know.

Congratulations, too, to the families who have nurtured these graduates, who have supported them in so many ways through their time here. You, too, will remember this day of fulfillment and consummation. Well done!

Juniata College Commencement Address, May 9, 2004

And I bring this sentiment also to the College – its faculty and staff. You are sending out into the world another flight of graduates indelibly marked by Juniata, cared for by this place, educated here, and molded by your values. The process works: the evidence is before us. Congratulations!

I just said that the process works. That is, education in the liberal arts and sciences *does* work. But there is a puzzle about it that is as old as Plato, who worried in the *Protagoras* over the question whether virtue can be taught. Surely, we think, in some sense the answer must be “Yes, virtue can be taught,” or why are we here? And yet there are discouraging counterexamples. In your honor, graduates, I want to invite you this afternoon into reflection about this central puzzle of liberal education.

Bertrand Russell, in his *History of Western Philosophy*, quotes A.W. Benn on the moral qualities of Alexander the Great: “It would be unfortunate if philosophy had no greater testimonial to show for herself than the character of Alexander...Arrogant, drunken, cruel, vindictive, and grossly superstitious, he united the frenzies of a Highland chieftain to the vices of an Oriental despot.”¹

Aristotle tutored Alexander the Great for three years, between the ages of 13 and 16 (343-340 B.C.E.). Alexander’s father, Philip, had hired the great philosopher to teach his son after Aristotle’s stint at Plato’s Academy, and before the founding of his own school, the Lyceum, in Athens. Robin Lane Fox makes Philip’s quest for a tutor for Alexander sound like a faculty search. “Candidates,” we learn, “were canvassed from far Aegean islands and Ionian cities of Asia.”² Aristotle was selected from the relatively nearby island of Lesbos. The conqueror-to-be received instruction at the feet of one who might well claim the title of history’s greatest polymath: the man who, in his time, came as close as anyone ever has to knowing everything available to be known (albeit much of it wrong!). He was an intellect so commanding that a millennium and a half later he was called simply “the Philosopher,” and “the Master of them that know.” Aristotle wrote on ethics, politics, poetics, rhetoric, metaphysics and epistemology, physics, biology – everything, in effect, there was to write about. He founded a school that survived until a Christian emperor closed it centuries later. Alexander must have received as broad and expertly conducted an education as could be imagined in his time.

We have to grant that nothing specific is known of the instruction Alexander received from Aristotle. The latter does not mention Alexander in any surviving work. Medieval writers imagined that Alexander learned writing, Greek, Hebrew, Babylonian, and Latin, as well as lore about the sea, the winds, and the stars. They also supposed that there was teaching on justice and rhetoric, and even warning against “the looser sorts of women.”³ Russell supposes, though, and probably rightly, that the impact of these efforts was “nil,” writing, “On the whole, the contacts of these two great men seem to have been as unfruitful as if they had lived in different worlds.”⁴

The greatest happiness of a human being, according to Aristotle, lay in the fulfillment of the highest, noblest capacities of human nature; that is, in rational contemplation of the Good. But this rational contemplation was not to take place in monkish seclusion. Rather, it is the pinnacle of a full and balanced life in which the exercise and enjoyment of all the capacities proper to a human being have their place – physical, political, social, economic, and aesthetic, as well as intellectual. Virtue, or excellence, for Aristotle, is a matter of balance, of moderation, of seeking and occupying the mean between extremes. Vice lies in excess and deficiency, and in a failure to develop the innate potentialities proper to being human.

After exposure to this teaching, Alexander undertook to conquer the world: an extreme goal if ever there was one. His personal behavior is marked by excess. He reaches beyond courage to rash frenzy in battle, as when he attacks the Persian center at the Granicus and is nearly killed. There is too much drinking, as when he refuses everything but wine in his final illness. There is competitive sexuality, in taking both male and female lovers for gratification, for politics, and for prestige. There are the overweening demands for obeisance, as on the drunken night in Central Asia when he spears to death his friend, lover, and general Cleitus. There is the insistence on the annihilation of resistant enemies, as at Tyre where the fall of the coastal city is followed by the slaughter of its men and the disposal of the women and children into slavery. He dares fate with foolhardy projects, as when he loses half his army crossing the Gedrosian Desert, an attempt prompted by the fact that no army had ever survived the crossing. And there is the unlimited, unmoderated desire, the drive and craving to go further,

to go beyond, that the Greeks called “*pothos*,” as when Alexander turned back from the borders of India only because the age, decrepitude, and fatigue of his army finally overcame their loyalty, and they refused to follow him further.

Finally, of course, Alexander was dead before his 33rd birthday, and his empire disintegrated in bloody funeral games. A legacy there was, and an important one, but it was not the legacy of one who had followed the moderate life based on Aristotelian precepts. He died young and left wreckage.

By the way, I know some people will want to argue that the results of Alexander’s campaigns were not all bad. He spread Hellenism throughout the Middle East and beyond, founded cities, encouraged cultural pluralism and syncretism, and made Greek the *lingua franca* of the Levant. He created the environment in which Greek literature and culture survived. He also emptied the Persian treasuries and may have stimulated an enormous economic boom. (Economists disagree about this, as about everything else.) By leaving Greek culture in central Asia, he had an impact on subsequent Buddhist iconography. But the fact remains that the means to these ends were horrific.

Alexander’s actions led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people, perhaps hundreds of thousands. He worsened the lives of hundreds of thousands more, perhaps millions. And this occurs, despite the best liberal education conceivable in the 4th century, BCE.

What are we to make of this disturbing fact: that it is perfectly possible for someone to be very well-educated, highly knowledgeable in a variety of fields, possessed of powerful deliberative and communicative abilities, and of refined aesthetic tastes, and to be morally abhorrent, let alone not a very nice person?

What is the role of liberal education in leading to a life well-lived? Here is the manifesto of one superb small college, a Phi Beta Kappa institution, on the life-enriching results of liberal education. As I read it, I ask you to imagine the career of Alexander, phrase by hopeful phrase:

[The]College believes that liberally educated men and women think and act critically, creatively, and humanely. They take charge of their lives and develop their unique potentials with reason, imagination, and

human concern. They take their place in the global community, understanding their responsibilities to aid individuals and to contribute to the larger society.⁵

The case of Alexander is discouraging, but not actually surprising. Not only do we all know very well-educated people who are not very nice (or are even morally abhorrent!), we can all recite cases from this century and the ones before in which whole societies – highly developed, cultured, cultivated – fell for monstrous ideologies and committed atrocities from which education did not deter them. So what can we hope for? Should we just quit saying that liberal education makes people better and more fulfilled? Is there any reason to suppose that it even makes people less inclined toward unprovoked attempts to conquer the world?

Let me frame this in the broad claim that there are really only two systems of ethics: the heroic and the civil. The heroic has no clearer exemplar than Alexander. We see it in Achilles and Odysseus and in the heroes of the Norse sagas. The quarrel, in fact, between Achilles and Agamemnon that opens the *Iliad* is a superb illustration. The heroic ethic is about honor, status, competition, the possession and enjoyment of goods, and receiving and granting treatment appropriate to one's standing among one's fellows. The central theme is the self-expression of one's own excellence. The aim is to live hard and die famous. It is a touchy, self-regarding ethic. It gives rise to duels and other violence and has little to do with moral behavior as we ordinarily think of it. It has about it the aura of the warrior, the countryside, and clannish violence. The life of Alexander is very close to this ethic.

The civil ethic, on the other hand, has as its exemplars Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, the teachings of the Stoics and the Epicureans, and the teachings of the great religions, from the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible and the Sermon on the Mount, to Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian ethics. The themes are restraint, self-control, moderation, respect for the feelings and status of others, and the cultivation of habits that make for peaceful resolution of conflicts and harmonious interactions. This ethic is about avoiding violence. If pride is a virtue, as it is in Aristotle, it is a quiet, measured pride. This ethic runs toward valuing humility, restraining pride, setting boundaries to or even overcoming the

self. One cultivates the practices of reflection and deliberation, weighing consequences, and attempting, dispassionately, to extirpate, or at least to balance, self-interest. This ethic has about it the aura of the citizen, the city, and compromise.

What does Phi Beta Kappa have to say about this contrast? Last year, we asked hundreds of members of the Society to come together in their communities – there were 18 sessions – to discuss the social value of the liberal arts and sciences. They reported to us, and we have studied their reports. Overwhelmingly, members of Phi Beta Kappa, reflecting on their education and their life experience, outlined what I have characterized as the civil ethic. They told us that they valued most highly the skills of deliberation and communication they had gained through the liberal arts and sciences: clarity of expression, the ability to understand and weigh evidence, the capacity to create and evaluate arguments. Next, they mentioned breadth of perspective, the capacity to appreciate different points of view, tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. These capacities segued into sympathetic understanding of differences, and the ability to enter into the experiences of others, and from there the list heads toward social awareness, responsibility, leadership, and the sense of an obligation to contribute to the world's betterment. Bringing up the rear – honorable mention, but just that – was an appreciation of broad knowledge.

My hunch is that knowing things – just knowing them – got such late and brief mention because knowing things is imbedded in everything else. Or rather, everything else is imbedded in knowing things. Knowledge is the medium in which all the rest exists. You can't say anything clearly unless you have something to say. You can't weigh evidence without knowing what's true and false. You can't raise interesting questions about cultural difference unless you know what people in different cultures believe; and so on. I suspect these Phi Beta Kappas didn't have much to say about knowledge because it makes possible everything they did mention. (A Kantian would call this a transcendental proof, but never mind.)

What does this have to do with Alexander? I'm coming to that. Suppose we start thinking about the essential business of the liberal arts and sciences at the point these Phi Beta Kappas mention. Take a central intellectual skill like constructing and understanding an argument. An argument, according to one of the great philo-

sophical collectives of the late 20th century – Monty Python – is an intellectual process, “a connected series of statements to establish a definite proposition.”⁶ And don’t say “No it isn’t!” An argument, by the same authority, isn’t just contradiction. In arguments – Monty Python got this exactly right – we give reasons.

And what are reasons? We don’t need metaphysics for this one, just a little analysis. Reasons are facts that people trot out. Reasons have to be relevant to the proposition they’re supposed to support. In fact, that’s what being a reason is – being relevant to the adjudication of the truth or falsehood, the acceptability or not – of the proposition. Think of cases when people cry out: “That’s not a reason!”

In fact, a good rough and ready account of an argument is that the facts adduced as reasons for the proposition in question need to be true, relevant, and strong: True, so they have force; relevant, so that they matter; and strong enough to outweigh possible countervailing reasons. Now we see that we don’t need metaphysics to tell us what a value is. When people disagree about the facts, they just disagree about the facts. They need to find out. But when people disagree about the relevance and strength of admitted facts in an argument, they are disagreeing about values. So values are rules of relevance: rules that govern what it makes sense to bring up in arguing a particular proposition.

Now, for the liberal arts and sciences. It isn’t just logic, though a little logic helps. And it isn’t just about learning facts, though a lot of facts help. Facts are indispensable. But it’s also about engaging with the facts, seeing the patterns of relevance into which they fall. It was well said that everything is connected with everything else. But sometimes those connections are distant and weak, and sometimes they are direct and strong. Seeing the facts in patterns; seeing patterns of relevance; and getting a picture of things. That’s what the liberal arts and sciences are about. Without facts, the picture is empty. With only facts, it is chaotic. What makes it a picture are the patterns of relevance.

And so to say that the business of the liberal arts is to help people see the world in new ways is very much the same as saying that it is to help them to acquire the skills of deliberation. And the skills of deliberation, we recall, are the core of the civil ethic. Deliberation proceeds from, and produces, these patterns of relevance. That is why the beneficiaries of liberal arts education want

to talk right away about deliberation and understanding.

Earlier, I reported that the acquisition of the skills of deliberation was the aspect of liberal education most prized by its beneficiaries. And I have sketched an account of argument – the presentation of reasons in support of a proposition, reasons that need to be true, relevant, and strong. But deliberation isn't just *presenting* an argument. Deliberation is *weighing* an argument, either in preparing it or in receiving it. Deliberation is asking what is true, what is relevant, and what is strong, relative to other relevant reasons, in support of a conclusion. It involves the temporary suspension of commitments, the abatement of passion, the consideration of alternatives. Deliberation is when I say, "All right, suppose I did see it like *that*. What would be the result?"

There are serious issues concerning the possibility and limits of deliberation in the sense that I am extending it; namely, deliberation as the evaluative entertainment of alternative ways of conceiving the truth, relevance, and strength of reasons available in support of a conclusion.

We have to acknowledge all the theories, and the perennial presence of Thrasymachus – the character, you remember, in Plato's *Republic* who bursts out at Socrates, impatient with argument, asserting that justice (and by extension, whatever you care to mention) is no more than whatever the strongest wish it to be. We have to acknowledge the discouraging case of Alexander. But it is still true that the beneficiaries of the liberal arts and sciences report that the skills of deliberation are the most important results of their education. Does it make them better versions of themselves? Not necessarily. Is it the best way we know to maximize that possibility? Apparently it is.

In Book VII of the *Republic*, Glaucon worries about teaching philosophical dialectic – a version of this deliberation – to the young. "Might it not be, Socrates," he frets, "that when they have learned the dialectic, the young become like puppies, delighting in tugging and tearing at anyone who comes near them?"⁷ Socrates acknowledges the danger, and tells Glaucon that he has identified an important point: the dialectic is to be entrusted to those who are "bent on seeking truth." It is perhaps not possible to identify beforehand those who love the Good. Nor, perhaps, would the resulting admission policies pass legal scrutiny. And anyway, our promise, surely, was to

help people learn to appreciate the Good, to refine their conceptions of it, and to cultivate their inclination to practice it.

Most, we hope, to some degree will. Some, perhaps a few, like Alexander, will not “get it.” The phrase is particularly apt. Deep in the forbidding tangles of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, there is a treatment of what has come to be called “the paradox of rule-following.” How can I follow a rule at all, the problem goes, since *on some interpretation* of the rule, whatever I do counts as following it?” The key phrase here is “on some interpretation.” The phrase gestures toward alternative systems of belief, of relevance, and of weighing the strength of this or that purported reason for taking the rule in this way or that.

There is no formal solution to this paradox. But there is the fact that – when we can speak of following a rule at all – at some level, in the offering of interpretations and reasons in their truth, relevance, and strength, people finally just “get it.” Because of their upbringing and training, because of their education, because of innate human responses to things, or because of sheer decision to do this rather than that, people finally, for the most part, “get it.”

Now what is deliberation? Deliberation is the attempt to reach as far as we can, articulately, rationally, with reasons, into the process of uptake before we have to fall back on saying that some people “get it” and others don’t. An absolute commitment to deliberation, then, would amount to an absolute commitment never to abandon anyone, never to say dismissively, “He just doesn’t get it.” And a commitment to teach the skills of deliberation would be to encourage their practice – to encourage the hope that even a discouraging case like Alexander might, finally, somehow, “get it.”

In conclusion, if I offer you graduates the exhortation to go out and conquer the world, please understand that I am not recommending that you do what Alexander did. I am confident that you will not, because I believe that here at Juniata you did indeed “get it.” You “got” what liberal education offers. Instead of behaving like Alexander, I know you will practice the virtues of the civil ethic. Deliberate. Act well. Live happily. And above all, for today, congratulations!



NOTES

- ¹ Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1946), 183.
- ² Robin Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 53.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ "The First Principles," McDaniel College, <http://www.mcdaniel.edu/about/mis-sion.shtml> (May 13, 2005).
- ⁶ Graham Chapman, et al., *The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus: All the Words*, 2 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), II, 87-88.
- ⁷ Plato, *The Republic*, translated by F.M. Cornford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 261.

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