

## POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

By the early 1970s, the humanities were floundering. Ideological rifts were widening. Traditional ways of teaching had lost much of their authority, and there was worried talk of a “crisis” in the humanities.<sup>1</sup> To many it seemed less clear than it had a quarter century before, when Harvard published its famous report on the aims of liberal education, what the humanities are supposed to do and why their doing it is important.<sup>2</sup>

In this anxious and excited environment, a new set of ideas began to gain currency. The first idea was an outgrowth of the civil rights movement and is associated with the concept of diversity. The second generally goes under the name of multiculturalism, and reflected the deepening suspicion of Western values provoked, in part, by the Vietnam War. The third, which provided philosophical support for the other two, I shall call the idea of constructivism, though its supporters have given it a variety of other names (“post-modernism,” “antiessentialism,” and the like). Loosely inspired by the work of philosophers as different as Marx, Nietzsche, and Foucault, constructivism affirmed the artificiality of all human values

and the absence of any natural standards by which to judge them. It insisted, in particular, that the values of the West have no inherent superiority over those of other civilizations and are merely instruments of power in disguise that must be unmasked and resisted as weapons of colonial oppression. Together, these three ideas are the source of the culture of political correctness that has dominated the humanities for the past forty years.

Each has something to recommend it. Each has a core of good sense with intellectual and moral appeal. And each draws its appeal from a feature it shares with secular humanism, which also acknowledged the diversity of human values and the need to construct one's life by making a choice among them. Together these ideas have helped to maintain the confidence of many in the humanities that they do in fact have something special to contribute to the work of higher education. They have helped define a new and distinctive role for the humanities, organized around attractive moral and political values—one that fills the void that opened up when teachers in these fields abandoned their role as guides to the question of life's purpose and value in favor of the research ideal. And they have done this in a way that appears consistent with the values of secular humanism itself.

But this appearance is a mirage. Secular humanism rested in a balance between the authoritarianism of the antebellum college and the radicalism of the ideas that have dominated the humanities since the 1970s. It occupied an attractive and defensible midpoint between them. The ideas of diversity, multiculturalism, and constructivism exploded this balance. They extended the main principles of secular humanism in ways that do not improve but destroy them, creating an intellectual environment as hostile to secular hu-

manism as the dogmatic classicism of the old-time college had been in a different way. Those who have embraced these ideas have not succeeded in defining a constructive new role for the humanities. They have in fact done just the reverse. They have made their own distinctive authority even harder to recover by casting into deeper doubt the values that once sustained it.

At the same time, they have further weakened the humanities' already vulnerable claim to respect, as measured by the modern research ideal. Diversity, multiculturalism, and constructivism are ideas that have failed to gain even a modest foothold in the natural and strong social sciences. That is because they are antithetical to the scientific ambitions of these disciplines and to their programs of research. Only in the humanities have these ideas attracted a significant following and been embraced as pedagogical values. The result has been to make the humanities appear even less respectable from the vantage point of those disciplines that have had the greatest success in meeting the demands of the research ideal—the principal source of authority and prestige in American higher education today. Today, the humanities are not merely in a crisis. They are in danger of becoming a laughingstock, both within the academy and outside it. Looking to build a new home for themselves, they have instead dug a hole and pitched themselves to its bottom.<sup>3</sup>



The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s was the most important social movement in America in the twentieth century. Its aims were profoundly just and drew for their support on the best in

America's legal and political traditions. The first goal of the movement was formal equality before the law. But the achievement of full racial justice demanded a significant redistribution of resources as well. African-Americans had suffered under a regime in which they received far less than their fair share of the basic goods of life. This was a historical injustice that could be repaired only by a compensatory transfer of wealth and opportunities large enough to give the victims of discrimination the resources they needed to take meaningful advantage of their newly won legal protections. Given the importance of education to a person's economic and other prospects, it seemed obvious that any compensatory program of this kind must include a significant redistribution of educational opportunities. At the primary and secondary school levels, this was achieved through busing—the physical transfer of students from one school to another. At the college and university level, the principal instrument of redistribution was “affirmative action.”<sup>4</sup>

Affirmative action means giving a preference to minority applicants in a school's admissions process—first and most emphatically to African-Americans and later, as the concept broadened, to other minority candidates as well. In its original conception, affirmative action was a backward-looking program whose aim was to repair the injustice done to victims of past discrimination. Early defenders of affirmative action reasonably argued that this could be done only by giving race a positive weight in admissions decisions to offset the negative weight it had had in the past.<sup>5</sup> But even if the moral legitimacy of such rebalancing seemed clear, a crucial legal question remained. Can a school legally justify its use of race-conscious criteria in the admission of students on the grounds that doing so is necessary to compensate for the racial injustices of the past? In 1978,

in the celebrated case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, the Supreme Court of the United States said no. *Bakke* involved a challenge to the constitutionality of an affirmative action program at the medical school at the University of California, Davis, that reserved a number of places in each entering class for minority applicants. Writing for the Court, Justice Lewis Powell declared that past racial discrimination in the society at large is an insufficient basis for present discrimination based on race in an opposite, compensatory direction and concluded that the Davis program was unconstitutional.<sup>6</sup>

But in his opinion, Justice Powell suggested an acceptable alternative rationale for affirmative action. A scheme of racial preferences is constitutionally permissible, he said, if a school can show (as the University of California had not) that it contributes in a direct and important way to the school's educational program by fostering a diverse student body. This part of Powell's opinion pointed a way to save affirmative action programs—one that did not require a shift in their mechanics but only in their asserted justification. The key to the defense of affirmative action was no longer the idea of compensation for past wrongs. That idea had been ruled out of court. In its place, Powell's opinion forced colleges and universities to substitute the very different idea of diversity as a pedagogical value. To be legally allowable, affirmative action would henceforth have to be linked not to the external goal of promoting racial justice, but to a school's own internal objectives—to the creation of the best possible environment for teaching and learning. For the past quarter-century, the defense of affirmative action has rested entirely on this latter idea, whose legitimacy was recently (if narrowly) reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in a case upholding the University of Michigan's

use of a scoring system that gives minority applicants extra points in order to achieve a diverse student body and the educational benefits associated with it.<sup>7</sup>

The claim that diversity promotes learning is, up to a point, uncontroversial. Students surrounded only by others like themselves have a more limited and less challenging exposure to the variety of outlooks and experiences young people bring with them to college. They are more likely to be stimulated and unsettled in the company of others from different backgrounds. For many students, college offers the first opportunity for a sustained encounter with others whose formative experiences, family lives, and religious beliefs are sharply different from their own. This encounter itself has educational value. It plays an important role in the deepening of critical self-awareness and the widening of imaginative sympathy that are crucial elements of moral and intellectual growth.<sup>8</sup>

But this reasonable and innocuous proposition becomes less plausible and its consequences less benign when it is extended from the general culture of a school to the organized work of the classroom—when racial and other forms of diversity are used as criteria for the selection of topics and texts and when they become an important factor in defining the purpose of teaching itself.

The argument for doing this is by now familiar. It starts from the premise that many disciplines call for interpretive judgments that are peculiarly responsive to a person's interests and values. History and literature are good examples. Different people approach these subjects from different points of view, depending on what is of interest and value to them. Honesty requires that these differences be acknowledged, not suppressed, and learning proceeds best in an environment in which they are brought out and the conflicts among

them made clear. Among the determinants that shape a person's interpretive judgments, race plays a particularly powerful role, at least in America where race has long been a factor of prime importance in social, political, and cultural life. Gender and ethnicity are factors of near-equal importance. Given the pedagogical value of interpretive diversity and the particularly important role that race, gender, and ethnicity play in the formation of a person's approach to a wide range of interpretive questions, it is educationally appropriate, indeed imperative, that in fields like history and literature teaching materials be chosen, themes and topics selected, and methods of instruction employed with an eye to focusing attention on the ways in which these factors condition a person's interests and values and hence interpretive point of view—whether the person be the author of a text, a participant in a historical event, or a critic attempting to make sense of either.<sup>9</sup>

This argument has not been received with much enthusiasm in the natural and strong social sciences, however. Teachers of physics and economics do not, of course, reject the notion that theirs are interpretive disciplines too. Nor do they deny that competing interpretations in their fields are importantly shaped by a person's value judgments (for example, regarding the choice of topics deemed worthy of study).<sup>10</sup> But they assume that interpretive disputes within their disciplines should be judged from an impersonal point of view that every physicist or economist is able to adopt. And they further assume that a teacher's or student's judgments regarding these disputes are not so closely linked to immutable personal characteristics, like race or gender, that they cannot be revised or overcome in light of considerations that appear compelling from this impersonal perspective. Disciplines like physics and economics reject the

assumption of a strong connection—indeed, of any meaningful connection at all—between the interpretive judgments of those in these fields and their race or gender, and therefore reject the pedagogical recommendation that texts be chosen and teaching methods designed for the very purpose of bringing this connection to light, a proposal at war with their own deepest disciplinary ideals.

It is only in the humanities that the connection between interpretation, on the one hand, and race and gender on the other, has been enthusiastically endorsed as a principle of classroom instruction. That this is true as a matter of fact can hardly be doubted. A casual survey of course offerings in the humanities departments of most American colleges and universities today is likely to turn up a fair number whose design reflects the belief that interpretive judgments are strongly shaped by race and gender and that exposing the connection between them is an educational goal of the first importance.<sup>11</sup> But the reason for this is less obvious. Why are courses based on this assumption found with such frequency in the humanities and rarely if at all in the natural and strong social sciences? One answer is a negative one: the absence in the humanities of a compelling ideal of impersonal truth comparable to the one that exists in these other fields and which makes it implausible and inappropriate to suggest that the interpretive judgments of those in these fields are a function of race and gender. But there is another explanation that reflects the special insecurity of the humanities regarding their position in the modern research university and their need to define for themselves some new and useful and distinctive role to fill.

When the Supreme Court declared that racial preferences would henceforth have to be justified on the grounds that they contribute to the advancement of a school's internal educational goals, it gave



colleges and universities a powerful incentive to emphasize the link between racial diversity, on the one hand, and the enterprise of teaching and learning on the other. This can be done in a general way by pointing out the broad educational advantages of a diverse student body—the informal opportunities that diversity affords for widening each student’s horizon of experience and belief. But for the defense of affirmative action to be as strong as possible, it is strategically useful to show that racial (and eventually, gender and ethnic) diversity contribute to the educational process not only in the unstructured interactions of informal student life, in the dining hall and dormitory, but in the classroom too, where teaching and learning occur in their most explicit and organized form—to establish a connection between racial diversity and classroom instruction and thereby anchor the defense of affirmative action in the very heart of a school’s instructional program.

Most college and university administrators, and most teachers too, have felt the need to preserve their schools’ programs of affirmative action. They have recognized the remedial justice of these programs and their value in creating opportunities for African-Americans and other historically disadvantaged groups. And given the need to justify affirmative action in the terms the Supreme Court made mandatory in the *Bakke* case, most teachers and administrators have seen the forensic advantage of establishing a strong link between diversity and the instructional work of the classroom. For this places the need for diversity at the point where a school’s educational responsibilities are most deliberately focused and its judgments regarding the best ways of meeting them most deserving of judicial respect. But the natural and social sciences cannot acknowledge this link without compromising their own disciplinary

ideals. In the humanities, the danger is less apparent. Of all the disciplines, the humanities are therefore in the best position to argue that racial diversity is essential to the work of the classroom and hence to supply in its strongest and least assailable form the connection that Justice Powell's conception of affirmative action demands. They are in fact the only disciplines in a position to endorse the idea of racial diversity as a pedagogical value. The diversity defense, which the Supreme Court in 1978 made the only acceptable justification for affirmative action, thus opened an opportunity for the humanities to reclaim a special place for themselves in the academy. It enabled teachers in the humanities to see themselves as making a distinctive and valued contribution to the work of higher education by protecting their schools' programs of affirmative action in the most effective way possible—something their colleagues in the natural and social sciences were prevented by their own ideals from doing. It helped humanities teachers view themselves as their schools' leading agents in the morally and politically inspiring campaign to correct a great historical wrong and in this way offered, or appeared to offer, an ennobling way out of the directionlessness and self-doubt that overtook their disciplines when they abandoned the tradition of secular humanism and drew themselves into the orbit of the research ideal.

But however compelling the moral and political aims of affirmative action, and however important to its legal defense the claim that in the humanities, at least, interpretive judgments are intimately linked to race and gender, the endorsement of this claim has not strengthened the humanities but weakened them instead. It has compromised their central educational values. And it has widened, not closed, the gap of authority that separates the humanities from

the natural and social sciences, where this same idea has been decisively rejected.



The interests and values we have as adults, and the interpretive judgments that flow from them, are importantly shaped by our early experiences. What we care about as grown-ups is to a considerable extent a function of where and how and by whom we were brought up. But we are not prisoners of our upbringings. To varying degrees we are able, as adults, to gain some measure of detachment from the experiences of childhood and to assess them with a critical eye—to reflect on the interests and values that we have inherited from our early lives and to ask whether, on reflection, we wish to continue to endorse them.

Something like this is what a liberal arts education, and the humanities in particular, have always promised. The humanities give young people the opportunity and encouragement to put themselves—their values and commitments—into a critical perspective. They help students gain some distance, incomplete though it must be, on their younger selves and to get some greater traction in the enterprise of living the lives they mean to live and not just those in which they happen by accident to find themselves. No one ever perfectly or permanently achieves a critical perspective of this kind. But its relative enlargement defines the freedom (the “liberation”) that a liberal education promises, and the ability of the humanities to help students toward this goal has traditionally been an important source of their authority.

The more our interests and values are assumed to reflect immutable characteristics we inherit at birth, however, the less meaningful the pursuit of this freedom is likely to seem. For if our interests and values are deeply shaped by factors over which we have no control and that can never be changed, the prospect of gaining the independence we need to critically assess them, let alone revise or reject them, is no more realistic than that of jumping over one's shadow. The factors that influence our early experiences fall along a spectrum of mutability. Some are more easily changed than others. How we are brought up is a function, in part, of where we are brought up. As adults, we can choose to live elsewhere. We can even choose to abandon the religion in which we were raised for another or none at all, though this often involves emotional and spiritual turmoil. But some characteristics are fixed at birth and can be changed only with the greatest difficulty, if at all. They lie toward the far end of the spectrum of mutability. Race and gender are characteristics of this kind. Our power to alter or undo them is at a minimum, compared with other characteristics like location, religion, and class. Emphasizing their influence on our interests and values therefore inevitably discourages the hope that with effort one can gain a meaningful degree of independence from these interests and values themselves and be in a position to freely endorse, revise, or reject them. For if my most fundamental attitudes are conditioned by my race and gender, so that I cannot help but see and judge the world from the vantage point they immutably fix, how can I ever hope to escape their orbit, subject these attitudes to critical review, and set myself the goal of living in some way other than the one they prescribe? The more deeply and rigidly my judgments are shaped by race and

gender, the more the very idea of pursuing this goal is likely to seem an illusion.

The belief that diversity is a pedagogical value starts with race and with the claim that race is an important and appropriate criterion for the selection of texts and teaching methods. By endorsing this claim the humanities help to strengthen the legal and political case for affirmative action. But their enthusiastic affirmation of a deep connection between judgment and race—the least mutable, perhaps, of all our characteristics—at the same time undermines the pursuit of the intellectual and moral freedom which the humanities once made it their special business to promote. It subjects the goal of self-criticism to tighter restrictions and makes exhortations to reach it less credible. It strengthens the cynical and despairing belief that we can never see the world from any point of view but the one permanently fixed by our racial identities or escape the gravitational pull of the interests and values these create. The claim that gender should play an important role in deciding what and how to teach has a similarly dispiriting effect, for it too is nearly immutable. And even the idea that ethnicity should play such a role tends in the same direction. Ethnic identity is undoubtedly more fluid and changeable than either race or gender. But to the extent that a person's ethnicity is conceived in terms conditioned by these other factors—as being nearly as deep and fixed as they—even it is likely to seem a discouragingly high barrier to the achievement of the freedom the humanities promise.<sup>12</sup>

These effects are often balanced or outweighed by forces pressing in the opposite direction. Diversity is only one factor that today exercises an influence on the way the humanities are taught. Other,

more traditional values limit its reach. But at the margin, other things equal, the effect of emphasizing the influence of race and gender on a person's interests and values is to discourage the ambition to gain some critical distance on them. For the more one stresses the depth and pervasiveness of this influence, the more difficult it becomes to believe that one can ever attain a critical perspective of this sort and the harder to sustain the ambition to reach it. The marginal effect of the endorsement of diversity as a pedagogical value is therefore to make this goal more difficult *even to aspire* to attain and by doing so to further compromise the standing of the humanities, whose own special authority has traditionally been tied to the belief that the enhancement of one's self-critical powers, and of the freedom they represent, is a goal that is both worthy and attainable.

The pursuit of this goal has traditionally been described as the search for an individual identity of one's own. But the more students are convinced of the futility of attempting to overcome the influence of their membership in groups that determine their values and from which they can never escape, the more likely they are to adopt a goal of a different kind. The more likely they are to see themselves as representatives of these groups and to define their task as that of being responsible advocates for them. When individuals exchange views as individuals, they converse. Their exchange is characterized by the flexibility that is the hallmark of every real conversation. This is true even if their views are different or antagonistic. By contrast, when two people meet as representatives, they speak not on behalf of themselves but of the groups to which they belong. It is to the group, not to their interlocutor or to the conversation in which they are engaged, that their loyalty is owed. Betrayal no longer means

faithlessness to oneself and to the conversation but to the group on whose behalf one speaks. The individuals exchanging views cease to be individuals, and their exchange ceases to be a conversation. Its personal significance for them declines and its political importance as a negotiation increases.

The more a classroom resembles a gathering of delegates speaking on behalf of the groups they represent, the less congenial a place it becomes in which to explore questions of a personally meaningful kind including, above all, the question of what ultimately matters in life and why. In such a classroom, students encounter each other not as individuals but as spokespersons instead. They accept or reject their teachers as role models more on account of the group to which they belong and less because of their individual qualities of character and intellect. And the works they study are regarded more as statements of group membership than as the creations of men and women with viewpoints uniquely their own—with the depressing result that great works that have been unjustly neglected on account of a shameful discrimination against their creators are finally given their due, but only on the condition that they too be treated as representatives, like the students and teacher in the classroom, and not as individuals whose greatness lies in the singularity of their achievement.

For a classroom to be a productive environment in which to approach the question of what living is for, the students in the class must be personally engaged in the conversation. They must feel free to participate as individuals and not merely as delegates whose first responsibility is to the groups they represent. To the extent they are encouraged to see themselves as representatives instead, the first-personal question of life's meaning is likely to seem less relevant and

even, perhaps, self-indulgent. At the same time, they must be open to the possibility that their own ideas about the relative appeal of the different values around which a human life can be arranged may be changed by their encounter with the ideas of their classmates. And for that to be possible, they must view themselves as participants in a shared enquiry, facing the same eternal questions that every human being confronts and struggling together to meet them. These may seem like contradictory requirements—personal engagement and human solidarity. But they represent, in fact, the two sides of a single experience, for it is only on the basis of their common humanity that students from different backgrounds, racial and otherwise, can ever discover or create their shared investment in the intensely personal question of what gives life its purpose and value. The belief that a person's deepest interests and values are irrevocably fixed by immutable characteristics like race and gender, and that the purpose of classroom instruction is to bring this connection to light, undermines both of these conditions at once. It makes it more difficult for students to venture the personal engagement that any serious conversation about the meaning of life demands by encouraging them to adopt the less challenging posture of representatives instead. And at the same time it makes it harder for students to accept the notion of a common human solidarity that transcends the experience of the particular group to which they happen by fate to belong, whose own more limited life forms a horizon beyond which they can never in any meaningful sense aspire to reach.

The argument that supports the use of racial and other forms of diversity as a principle of classroom instruction thus simultaneously undermines both the spirit of personal engagement and the sense of common humanity on which the vitality of the classroom as a



forum for the exploration of the question of the meaning of life depends. It does not destroy these conditions completely. No argument has the power to do that. But its tendency is to make them harder to establish and sustain.

Only the humanities have embraced this argument with any warmth. Only they have affirmed that racial and gender diversity is a pedagogical value. The natural and strong social sciences reject this claim completely. But these latter disciplines also make no pretense of addressing the question of what living is for. It is for them no longer a question of any importance. It falls outside their jurisdiction; their own methods demand they ignore it. The sad result of the humanities' use of racial and gender diversity as a criterion for the selection of texts and teaching methods has therefore been to make it harder to pursue the question of life's meaning in the only disciplines in which there is still any chance of asking it.



Secular humanism of course recognized the value of diversity too. It celebrated the plurality of the main forms of human fulfillment and insisted that these can never be ranked in a hierarchy of comparative worth. But the diversity that secular humanism endorsed was a deeper and more challenging one than the shallow version that today's politically and morally inspired defenders of the idea have in view. For the diversity they embrace (of race, gender, and ethnicity) rests implicitly on attitudes and values that everyone is expected to share.

Broadly speaking, these are the values of political liberalism.

Today's defenders of diversity assume that, on a range of issues, the interpretive judgments of their students will differ according to their race, gender, and ethnicity. But at the same time they expect their students to share a commitment to the values of political liberalism that support the ideal of racial justice which in turn motivates the programs of affirmative action, to whose defense the contemporary concept of diversity itself is so important. In the humanities today, these values form the bedrock of what solidarity students experience. For however large the differences among their variously conditioned points of view, the legal and moral justification of the educational program in which they are engaged (whose very purpose is to bring these differences to light) presupposes an acceptance of the values of political liberalism and above all of the vigorous and expansive interpretation of equality that lies at its core. Because it rests on these values, the claim that diversity of race and gender should be an organizing principle of classroom instruction itself enforces, openly or covertly, an allegiance to them and to the community of moral and political commitment they represent.

These values may be the best—the fairest and most durable—foundation on which to build a political community. I believe they are. A legal and cultural environment marked by the freedoms and protections that political liberalism affords may be the setting in which institutions of higher education are most likely to flourish. I think it is. But when a presumptive commitment to the values of political liberalism begins to constrain the exploration of the personal question of life's meaning—when the expectation that everyone shares these values begins to place implicit limits on the alternatives that may be considered and how seriously they are to be

taken—the enterprise itself loses much of its significance for the students involved and their teachers lose their authority to lead it.

Whatever fails to accord with the values of political liberalism fits uncomfortably within the range of possibilities that the contemporary conception of diversity permits students to acknowledge as serious contenders in the search for an answer to the first-personal question of what living is for. The political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, with their easy acceptance of the natural inequality of human beings, offend these values at every turn.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the theological tradition that runs from Augustine to Calvin, with its insistence on church authority and its doctrines of sin and grace. And even much of poetry (all of it, if we believe what William Hazlitt says in his essay on Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*) is motivated by an anti-egalitarian love of beauty and power.<sup>14</sup> All of these ideas and experiences are suspect from the standpoint of the liberal values from which the contemporary ideal of diversity takes its start. None represents the “right” kind of diversity. None fits within the range of acceptable alternatives. None is to be taken in a really serious way, as a live option in the search for an answer to the question of the meaning of life. None is suitable as a basis for political life, and hence—here is the crucial step—none is suitable (respectable, acceptable, honorable) as a basis for personal life either. None provides the least justification for the personal affirmation of illiberal values in a liberal republic. None, in the end, can perform any useful function other than as an example of what to avoid, as an illustration of the confused and intolerant views of those who had the misfortune to be born before the dawning of the light. All of them must be written down, or off, and excluded from serious consideration when

exploring the possibilities for answering the question of life's purpose and value in a really serious and responsible way.

By comparison with the diversity that secular humanism affirmed, today's diversity is so limited that one might with justification call it a sham diversity, whose real goal is the promotion of a moral and spiritual uniformity instead. Secular humanism allowed for a much wider palette of possibilities. It had room for the soldier who values honor above equality, for the poet who believes that beauty is more important than justice, for the thinker who regards with disinterest or contempt the concerns of political life—as well as for the moral crusader devoted to liberal values. It had room for Plato's elitism and Augustine's pessimism as well as for more democratic and cheerier views of life. Much of this—most of it, in fact—must be ruled out as archaic or unworthy or worse by those who define the idea of diversity in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity, and who give an overwhelming priority to the system of moral and political values that underlie the ideal of reparative justice for whose sake this conception of diversity has been promoted as a pedagogical norm.

This new conception of diversity may seem to some an improved version of the older one that secular humanism endorsed, which from their perspective looks limited on account of its failure to acknowledge the importance of race and gender in the formation of our values and beliefs. But the politically and legally inspired conception of diversity that has been so influential in the humanities during the past forty years has not produced a widening of the range of human possibilities that may legitimately be considered in reflecting on the question of how one should live. It has produced a contraction instead. The presumption of allegiance to the values of political liberalism that underlie and support the contemporary un-

derstanding of diversity in the humanities has reduced the idea of humanity itself to a liberal egalitarian point. Alternative conceptions of value and the ways of life devoted to them have of course not disappeared as subjects of discussion in the humanities departments of our colleges and universities. But they are no longer taken seriously as conceptions one might embrace in one's own life. They are there mainly as examples of how not to live or think. In personal terms—the only terms in which the question of life's meaning can ever be framed—the diversity that today prevails in our humanities classrooms is anemic and misleading. For despite the claim of its defenders to have widened the horizon of student understanding by acquainting them with values and experiences that were previously unnoticed or suppressed, the conception of racial and gender diversity that is so enthusiastically embraced by so many humanities teachers today is in reality driven by an oppressive uniformity of moral purpose from whose perspective the more robust diversity of secular humanism can only seem morally dubious.

Of course, if one starts with the assumption that there is a single right answer to the question of what living is for and that students can be brought to see it, the nature and source of the humanities' authority will be clear. This was the premise on which the program of the antebellum college was based. But secular humanism rejected this assumption and sought to construct an organized approach to the question of life's meaning on non-dogmatic foundations. It recognized the values of plurality, freedom, and choice and claimed for the humanities a new source of authority, the only one available to them so long as we continue to acknowledge these values. By dramatically reducing the range of respectable alternatives that students may consider as personal templates for living, the identification of

diversity with race and gender has covertly restored the premise on which antebellum education was founded—the assumption of a single right way of living. It has brought us back full circle to the spirit of moral uniformity with which American higher education began. But the conformist spirit of the antebellum college cannot be restored. Our world is too deeply committed to the values of pluralism and choice for that. We live, and want to live, in a world shaped by these values, and the authority of the humanities today depends on the genuineness of the respect they accord them. The conception of diversity that now enforces a chilling sameness of opinion in many humanities classrooms gives lip service to these values. But it fails to honor them in their deepest and most challenging form. It fails to take them seriously, substituting for a real and disturbing diversity a superficial one whose implicit demand is that everyone think and judge alike. And by doing so it undermines the authority of those who defend the contemporary ideal of diversity, whose own dogmatism about good and bad values, good and bad attitudes, good and bad ways of living, is as out of keeping with the pluralism of our age as the dogmatism of the old-time college.

The authority of humanities teachers to lead their students in an exploration of the question of what living is for is a function of how seriously they take this question themselves. When its investigation is limited to those personal ideals that meet the requirements of political liberalism, the enquiry becomes less demanding. Its urgency and importance and danger and power to change one's life all decrease. It becomes a caricature of a real enquiry. And when this happens, those who are leading it lose their authority to do so. They become the moderators of a conversation in which little of personal consequence is at stake—that is no longer a real conversa-

tion at all. The humanities' equation of diversity with race and gender has made the political morality that undergirds it a mandatory premise of the enquiry into the personal meaning of life. It has contracted the range of this enquiry and dramatically reduced its stakes. It has anesthetized the question at its heart and cut teachers of the humanities off from the only source of authority they have to address it in a culture as resolutely pluralistic as ours.



One particularly important expression of this narrowing of outlook is the special weight that today's politically motivated conception of diversity assigns the judgments of the victims of injustice.

Programs of affirmative action rest on the principle of compensatory justice. They start from the morally (and sometimes legally) compelling idea that the victims of injustice should be compensated for their suffering, that those who have mistreated them should restore the balance of justice by making a compensatory payment of some kind. From the vantage point of compensatory justice, victims and victimizers do not stand on the same plane. There is a moral asymmetry between them, and the purpose of the transfer contemplated by every program of compensation is to put the parties back into a more balanced relation—which can only be done by taking something from the victimizers (money, opportunities, etc.) and giving it to their victims.<sup>15</sup>

This basic idea has tremendous force as a principle of moral and legal reasoning. But when it is extended to the classroom and given a pedagogical interpretation—when it is claimed that the insights and

perceptions of the victims of injustice have a greater claim to respect than those of their victimizers, that they reflect the realities of the world more accurately than the judgments of their oppressors and hence are truer in some fundamental sense—the result is a contraction of the range of points of view that students are encouraged (or even allowed) to entertain in a serious way. When the moral asymmetry implied by every program of affirmative action is given an epistemic interpretation of this kind, the result is a restriction of diversity.

The idea that the victims of injustice see the world more deeply and clearly than their oppressors is not, of course, a new one. It is a central theme in the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible and in the Christian gospels. The prophet who sides with the poor and oppressed, the forgotten and abused, with those who lack power and stand outside the circle of worldly authority and respect, sees things from a vantage point that those within this circle cannot reach.<sup>16</sup> For they—the possessors of authority and power—have an interest in the system of oppression from which they benefit that blinds them to it. They cannot see it because they are part of it. But the prophet and his followers are not, and because they are not their eyes are open to things the rich and powerful and contented of the world can never comprehend, things their own privilege prevents them from grasping.

This is a deep and recurrent theme in the sacred writings of Jews and Christians alike, and one of the cornerstones of the Western literary and philosophical tradition. It is an idea that has profound echoes even in our own secular age—in Marx's argument, for example, that among the classes of the capitalist order the proletariat enjoys a privileged position not just in a moral but in an epistemic



sense as well, that the structure of the capitalist system can be grasped as a whole only when seen from the perspective of the class on whose exploitation it depends.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps one can even hear an echo of this idea in Freud's insistence on the revelatory power of the most marginal and seemingly insignificant bits of human experience, of slips of the tongue and dreams, which from the privileged position of waking life we tend to dismiss as nonsense.<sup>18</sup> The notion that those who stand outside the established order, with its wealth and privilege and conventional habits of thought, enjoy a special advantage so far as its understanding is concerned, is one of the oldest and most compelling ideas of Western civilization.

But there is a competing and equally venerable idea that must also be given its due in any open-minded encounter with the traditions of the West. This is the idea that privilege and good fortune enable sound judgment rather than compromise it—that wealth, education, and other advantages typically help the person who has them to develop his spirit and mind more fully and freely. The person who lacks these advantages is likely, on this view, to be compromised by his lack of them, to be stunted or deformed intellectually and culturally, so that however sympathetic we may be to his plight, we ought not take his judgments as a benchmark of accuracy or wisdom. It is the person of well-being whose judgments should be our standard instead—the person of comfortable circumstances who has had the leisure to grow into a rounded, healthy human being. On this view, ignorance, poverty, and powerlessness are epistemic liabilities, not advantages, even when they are the products of a political or legal system we believe to be unjust. This idea plays an important role in Aristotle's account of ethical life, and in the writings of others who follow his lead.<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche gives it a

particularly dramatic interpretation and emphasizes its conflict with the epistemic priority that Judaism and Christianity assign the judgments and values of victims.<sup>20</sup>

The point is not that one or the other of these is right—that the victims of injustice are either enlightened or disabled by their exclusion from privilege and power. The point is that *both* of these ideas are deeply embedded in the tradition of Western thought, *both* have had articulate champions, *both* retain their plausibility and appeal today, and *neither* can be neglected by any son or daughter of the West who hopes to comprehend the tangled and conflicting skein of beliefs that lie at the heart of the civilization to which he or she is heir.

To say that the conflict between these two ideas is an aspect of the age-old conflict between Athens and Jerusalem is a simplification, but not far off.<sup>21</sup> That conflict is still alive. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how it could ever be settled. To understand the civilization of the West, to become its inhabitant in some personally meaningful sense, one must make this conflict one's own. One must confront it, grapple with it, and make of its competing visions of humanity what one can. Among the diversities of conviction and experience that a person needs to confront in the search for an answer to the question of what living is for, none, perhaps, is more urgent than this.

But today one of these two views has such an overriding presence in the humanities and enjoys so large an authority that its competitor has nearly disappeared from view. The moral and legal priority of the victim, which affirmative action recognizes and properly respects, has been converted in today's classroom into an epistemic priority that always gives decisively greater weight to the judg-

ments of those who can credibly claim to represent the point of view of a group that has been unjustly excluded from wealth and power. The judgments of students who cannot make this claim labor under a disadvantage. They lack the special standing that only the judgments of victims enjoy. Openly to challenge this presumption often requires personal courage in an environment as deeply shaped by the equation of racial justice with epistemic authority as many humanities classrooms now are. And the books and authors who challenge this presumption labor under the same disability too.

To the extent that this equation rules out or renders illegitimate other points of view—and in particular the old Aristotelean association of good judgment with privilege and well-being—it leaves a narrower range of fundamental possibilities to be considered. In place of the real and disturbing diversity that secular humanism acknowledged, it substitutes a superficial diversity, whose own asserted openness to previously excluded points of view conceals the reduction in perspectives it actually promotes and the smothering moral uniformity it encourages. The result is a classroom where the oldest and deepest tensions of Western civilization are no longer felt, where they are no longer allowed to be felt—a classroom in which any word that might give offense to the historical victims of injustice by challenging the epistemic priority of their judgments and perceptions is experienced as a further injustice, as yet another “silencing” of victims who have already been forced to be silent too long. The result is a classroom where everyone, teachers and students alike, feels compelled to tiptoe on eggshells for fear of giving offense, an intellectually and spiritually frozen classroom in which the prospect of honest and passionate debate over matters of deep importance—

about which disagreements are bound to be deep too—becomes ever more remote, all under the guise of promoting a more honest confrontation with the facts of racism, sexism, and the like.

However understandable and even admirable the political and moral motives that lie behind the contemporary understanding of diversity, it has compromised the humanities and made them a less promising medium for the exploration of the question of what living is for. The question is perennial and has lost none of its intensity. Today's college and university students—white, black, Hispanic, Asian, male, female—are as gripped by it as students have ever been. But they can no longer look to the humanities for help in answering it. For these have become cautious and fearful fields under the deforming pressure of a great moral ambition that has been forced, by accident of law, into a destructive educational theory.



Multiculturalism affirms the value of different cultures, traditions, and civilizations, especially of those other than the European West. In many ways, it represents the principle of diversity on a global scale. One strong motive for multiculturalism is the belief that the value of Western ideas and institutions has often been overstated, and that their overstatement has helped to legitimate a wide range of unjust and exploitative practices, especially during the centuries of Western colonial expansion: that it has been used to put a good face on behavior driven by racism, xenophobia, and greed. Many therefore regard the idea of multiculturalism as a needed corrective that

contributes to a program of moral and political reform by enhancing the dignity and cultural worth of peoples and traditions abused during the period of Western expansion. Like the concept of diversity, the idea of multiculturalism is motivated in significant part by political concerns and functions as an instrument of corrective justice, though the correction it seeks is mainly one of beliefs and values.

Like the concept of diversity, the idea of multiculturalism also has both a benign formulation that few would challenge and a more destructive version. The benign conception starts from the proposition that in today's world, where a variety of economic, technological, and political factors are drawing the peoples of the planet into ever closer contact (a phenomenon usually described as "globalization"), some understanding and appreciation of non-Western cultures is imperative for any young person who hopes to be able to act in this world in an intelligent and responsible fashion. For Westerners, appreciation of this sort was once a luxury—the province of specialists and connoisseurs. Today, it is a necessity. We are all, increasingly, citizens of the planet, confronted with questions and burdened with responsibilities that go far beyond our membership in this or that national community and our accidental, natal allegiance to a particular culture or tradition. Many who hold this view maintain that the education of every undergraduate in America today ideally ought to include a serious and sustained exposure to the art, literature, and historical experience of one or more of the world's non-Western civilizations—of China, for example, or India or Japan or Islam, or the civilizations of South and Central America. Every thoughtful college and university teacher will see the good

sense in this proposal, which represents a necessary step toward enlightened and responsible membership in the ecumenical community we now inhabit.<sup>22</sup>

But there is a less innocuous version of multiculturalism which asserts that the ideas and institutions of the West, and the works that embody them, have no more value than those of other, non-Western civilizations. This adds to the recognition of the achievements of these other civilizations an insistence on their moral and intellectual parity. That is the simple, if radical, proposition from which the second, destructive version of multiculturalism starts, and for those who embrace it the denial of its truth can only be the result of a kind of myopia—the natural, if regrettable, tendency of human beings to give greater value to what is near merely because it is familiar and reassuring. For defenders of the stronger version of multiculturalism, this myopia is both an epistemic error and a moral failing. The name they give it is “Eurocentrism,” and the remedy they recommend is to become less admiring of the achievements of the West and to cultivate the habit of believing in the equal worth of other civilizations—to lose one’s allegiance to the West and replace it with a more expansive allegiance to humanity at large, or the global community of peoples and cultures, or the victims of Western exploitation.<sup>23</sup>

This second version of multiculturalism is driven by a hostility to the ideas and institutions of the West that itself has many sources—the Marxist assault on liberal democratic practices and on the inequalities of wealth and talent that Western societies allow, which communist sympathizers in the West endorsed and that continues to have a moral resonance even today, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the discreditation of the communist move-

ment; the anti-colonial attack on Western values, in the writings of Frantz Fanon and others, that converted the Marxist critique of capitalistic economic exploitation into a cultural and psychological critique of imperial “identity domination”; and the deepening, and partly justified, skepticism about the wisdom and legitimacy of the projection of American power which the Vietnam War provoked and that has shadowed American foreign policy ever since.<sup>24</sup> Together these have encouraged a suspicion of the West, and an antagonism to its values, that has been a powerful force in our colleges and universities for the past several decades. They are the political source of the intellectual outlook expressed by the stronger version of multiculturalism. This is not an outlook that has been embraced with the same enthusiasm in all disciplines, however. Only in the humanities has the politically inspired belief in the equality of Western and non-Western cultures been adopted as a pedagogical principle and made the basis for a range of educational judgments, including the hiring of faculty and the design of courses and curricula. Only in the humanities has the anti-Western animus which these judgments reflect been translated into educational practice, further degrading their authority by undermining values central to the integrity and purpose of the humanities themselves.

This is true, first, with respect to what might be called the humanities’ “conversational” values. The works of non-Western civilizations are lasting and great; only an ignorant fool would deny this. But except occasionally and peripherally, they have not been a part of the conversation that constitutes the civilization of the West.<sup>25</sup> Conversation is a metaphor but it points to something real—to the fact that the great works of Western civilization address each other in complementary and quarrelsome ways. Philo and

Augustine grapple with Plato. Hobbes assaults Aristotle. Shakespeare confronts Machiavelli. Spinoza corrects Descartes. Kant answers Hume, Paine condemns Burke, Eliot recalls Dante, Brunelleschi studies the Pantheon, and so on without end. The works and ideas of the West's writers and artists are internally connected. They refer to each other, commending, correcting, disapproving, and building on the works of those who have gone before. It is this internally continuous conversation that the humanities have traditionally studied. By contrast, the works of the world's great civilizations can, with few exceptions, be gathered together only in an external fashion. Each of these civilizations has the same internal connectedness that characterizes that of the West. But the works and ideas of different civilizations can for the most part only be related externally, by setting them up as exhibits for an observer to admire. If they are to be internally connected, if there is to be a conversation among them, it is one the observer himself must begin, for the works themselves are not already conversing. They belong—to extend the metaphor one step further—to different worlds of speech, each internally connected but, except in rare and interesting cases, only externally linked to the others. If there is to be a conversation in which these great works meet, and begin to quarrel or agree, it must be a conversation that the observer, who surveys them all, creates. It falls to the observer to start the conversation since it is not already underway.

Some will say that this is just the point of multiculturalism: to get this conversation going. They will emphasize the moral and political importance of starting such a conversation in a world that is growing more interconnected each day. And they will stress that a real conversation cannot begin except on the premise of equality, on



the assumption that all the voices in it, and all the works through which they speak, are of equal value, and that the presumed superiority of one (the voice of the West) is a sure conversation-killer.

But this superficially attractive view has serious liabilities that its defenders overlook. First, it underestimates the difficulties of starting a meaningful conversation of the kind they recommend, for this requires a deep and sympathetic knowledge of all (or at least several) of the world's great civilizations as well as an ability to frame questions that link their works in a conversationally productive way. If these difficulties are not acknowledged, the conversation that results is likely to be a shallow syncretism that never gets beyond the serial and disconnected admiration most museum goers express as they move from one exhibit to the next.

More important, its proponents fail to acknowledge the moral significance of what is lost in the seemingly unobjectionable effort to establish a conversation among the world's cultures and peoples. For something of significance *is* lost, and that is the nurturance of a responsible connection to the past, which comes only with the experience of being brought into a conversation not of one's own making. To have the freedom to begin a conversation from scratch, to create the conversational links among works and ideas that are otherwise only externally related, is to be unconstrained by the limits imposed on those who enter a conversation already underway. It is to be free of the limitations of the past and of the gravitational pull these exert. It is to be in a weightless orbit of one's own. To some, perhaps, this may sound appealing. It may seem a kind of liberation or escape, and if the past from which one was escaping were truly dictatorial, that might be the case. But the past which the conversation of the West conserves and carries forward is hardly

dictatorial. It is constraining to be sure. Those who enter it are not free to say or think whatever they wish. They are constrained to respond to what has been said and thought before. But the response which the conversation invites is not one of blind obedience. The conversation of the West invites a free and critical response to the inheritance it conveys. It insists that the past be studied and given the weight it deserves, but demands that one struggle to reimagine its claims in fresh and better ways, in a conversation that is permanently open. To be free of the restrictions one inherits when one joins an ongoing conversation of this kind is not freedom but the illusion of freedom. It is, in fact, a form of irresponsibility, for to think that even with the best of intentions one can create on one's own, with the help of one's contemporaries, a new conversation that will be an adequate substitute for this older one, with all its richness and depth and accumulated links and connections, is to arrogate to oneself immense and immodest powers. It is to cut oneself off from the responsibilities that come with an inheritance and the duty, as a steward, to conserve and improve it. It is to occupy a world that has been extended spatially to encompass the entire planet but flattened temporally to the present moment—a world cut off from the intimate and sobering connection to the past which the experience of being educated in an ongoing conversation, in contrast to the intoxicating experience of creating a new one, affirms as a leading value.

The declared motive for severing this connection is to intensify our sense of community with others, to enlarge the circle of those to whom we feel connected. But its actual effect is to increase one's sense of isolation. For the more independent one is of the past, the less constrained by the tone and substance of a conversation long underway, the closer one approaches a condition of perfect self-

sufficiency that resembles nothing so much as that of a divine creator whose powers of invention are limitless and whose loneliness is complete. For a god, perhaps, such weightlessness and freedom are compatible with responsibility. But in the case of human beings they tend to destroy it. For us, responsibility always begins with a rootedness in the past, and the authority it exerts, even if our chief responsibility is to improve on this past in the best way that we can. The new conversation that an egalitarian multiculturalism would have us begin destroys this experience of rootedness. However confident its appeal to the notion of a larger, ecumenical responsibility, it is in truth the enemy of the spirit of responsibility our roots alone can nourish.



What I have just said does not, of course, tilt things in favor of the West. It only affirms the value of having roots in one ongoing conversation or another, and for that purpose any conversation that rises to the level of a civilization will do. There is nothing about the conversation of the West that gives it special value so far as the cultivation of roots is concerned.

It may perhaps be that for those born in the West, its civilization is more conveniently available. But it is certainly possible for a Westerner to adopt another culture or tradition as his or her own, to make its conversation his or her home, and to accept the constraints of its internal connections. The important thing is to be conversationally rooted, for that is crucial to the development of a sense of responsibility. If the strongly egalitarian form of multiculturalism

which insists that all cultures and traditions stand on a par, the Western and non-Western alike, were meant merely to encourage such adoptive possibilities by reminding us that every culture provides an equally suitable medium for the growth of roots and that none is in this regard superior to any other—if this were all that multiculturalism affirmed, where, one might ask, is the harm in its passionate denial of the superiority of Western civilization, with its particular (and not always benign) values and institutions?

The harm lies in the disingenuousness of the claim and in the effect it has on the credibility of the disciplines that endorse it.

The emergent global civilization we inhabit today provides the motive for multiculturalism and gives it its plausibility. But while this civilization is respectful—or at least aspires to be respectful—of many different cultures and traditions, acknowledging their distinctive achievements in a spirit of admiring toleration, it does not, at its deepest and most important level, assign equal weight or value to them all. The ideas and institutions that have the greatest prestige in this new global civilization, the ones that have the greatest influence on the individuals and communities striving to join it and that determine most decisively the conditions of everyday life as its inhabitants experience them, from the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro to the farms of Hunan Province to the suburbs of Los Angeles, are all of Western origin.

The ideals of individual freedom and toleration; of democratic government; of respect for the rights of minorities and for human rights generally; a reliance on markets as a mechanism for the organization of economic life and a recognition of the need for markets to be regulated by a supervenient political authority; a reliance, in the political realm, on the methods of bureaucratic administration,

with its formal division of functions and legal separation of office from officeholder; an acceptance of the truths of modern science and the ubiquitous employment of its technological products: all these provide, in many parts of the world, the existing foundations of political, social, and economic life, and where they do not, they are viewed as aspirational goals toward which everyone has the strongest moral and material reasons to strive. To be openly opposed to any of these things is to be a reactionary, a zealot, an obscurantist who refuses to recognize the moral and intellectual authority of this ensemble of modern ideas and institutions and who (fruitlessly) plants his feet against their irresistible tide.

These ideas and practices form the pillars of the global civilization that is taking shape around us, and where they are not already in place, define the direction of reform. Together they condition our everyday practical experience of the world and serve as a normative guide to what is progressive and backward, developed and undeveloped, modern and pre- (or anti-) modern in the world today. No coherent program can be organized on any other basis. The acceptance of these ideas and practices is the hallmark of modernization, which is in turn the defining feature of globalization, and all of them, all of these distinctively modern ideas and institutions, are of Western origin. Globalization *is* modernization, and modernization *is* Westernization. That is perhaps the single most striking fact of life today—a fact of planetary salience for all the peoples of the earth.

This does not mean, of course, that every Western cultural habit, every Western taste, exerts, or should exert, the same irresistible pull as these more basic features of modernization. There is plenty of room within our global civilization for local differences of many sorts, and we have every reason to want them to be preserved

and to learn, ourselves, to appreciate and enjoy them, even if only as spectators or (spiritual and cultural) tourists. But their preservation and enjoyment can themselves be secured only within a stable framework of political and economic institutions, and through the practice of a universal tolerance, that are themselves of Western origin.

Nor does it mean that even the most basic and irresistible features of the West are wholly benign. This is plainly not true, for example, of technology, which has a dark side too, in both practical and spiritual terms. But the campaign to contain technology, and to protect what it destroys, is one that itself can only be effectively conducted using other intellectual and moral resources of the West. To resist it from the outside in the name of other, non-Western traditions is a valiant but futile enterprise. Against the tide of technology, the native peoples of the world, whose reverence for the earth the West would do well to imitate, cannot maintain their footing. They are all destined to be swept away too. In this sense, even the fight against the West must be conducted on Western terms.<sup>26</sup>

Nor does it mean that the great generalities of free government and free enterprise, of constitutional security and human rights, admit of only one interpretation. Clearly, they admit of many. The implementation of each requires in every case a choice among alternatives. The constitutions of the world's political communities and the organization of their economies differ in interesting and important ways. But all these differences fall within a range defined by the acceptance of certain basic principles that constitute the permissible space of political and economic variance. And all of these principles, the ones that fix the terms of interpretive debate, are themselves of Western origin.

Nor does it mean that a person's many other identities must all be cancelled in favor of some single new one organized around Western values. We all have many identities. Most of us belong to a family, a linguistic and cultural community, a confessional group, a political association, and so on. We feel, to varying degrees, an allegiance to each and, to varying degrees, identify with them all. Our identities are complex mosaics of overlapping and sometimes conflicting commitments. The Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf describes himself as a Christian Lebanese, from an old and educated family, now living in Paris and writing in French.<sup>27</sup> Maalouf speaks of himself as a person with multiple identities, and his condition is hardly exceptional. The process of globalization has, if anything, made this even more obvious. A fantastic increase in physical mobility combined with the technological ability to maintain relations with others at a great distance means that many of us today live with an even more vivid sense of our multiple identities than was the case in the past. Globalization is helping to make Maalouf's situation our common human condition. It does not produce, or demand, the elimination of our other identities, of those that set us apart from one another, and their replacement by some new master identity based on cosmopolitan values we all share in common. Quite the opposite: it produces, as Maalouf and others have observed, a proliferation of identities and a complex of crosscutting allegiances. But it does demand that, however important these allegiances may be, we limit their authority in our lives by acknowledging that our relations to others—to all others—must be governed by a universal respect for their integrity as human beings. To our other identities, with their more restricted spheres of attachment, globalization adds our membership in an *ecumène* organized on the premise of a

universal humanity that transcends all such attachments. And it demands that this last identity be accorded a decisive primacy over the others (familial, tribal, religious, even political) in the sense that its requirements are acknowledged to constrain theirs. Its primacy is not eliminative. It does not require that these other identities be forgotten or abolished. Its primacy is that of a boundary which limits what may permissibly be done within the field it defines. This much globalization *does* demand, and the demand in question is one that was first accepted as a basis for the organization of human relations on a large territorial scale in the modern West. The idea of tolerance finds support in many traditions, especially religious ones. But only in the modern West did it become—fitfully, hesitantly, but with increasing clarity and determination—an axiom of political life. And while to accept this axiom is not to repudiate one's other identities, it is to fix the limits of what may be done in their name and for their sake. It is, in this sense, to "put them in their place." That is the modest but revolutionary result which the process of Westernization has partly accomplished and, to the extent it has not, that remains an aspirational goal not only for inhabitants of the West but for humanity in general.

Nor, finally, does the process of Westernization mean the triumph of the West in any partisan sense. For though the ideas and practices that are the hallmark of globalization have their historical beginnings in the West, and have been extended to the rest of the world in part through the aggressive and exploitative expansion of Western power, their authority and influence derive ultimately not from the fact of their Western origin, but from their universal validity and applicability. So far as the authority of modern science is concerned, for example, its origin in the West is a purely contingent



fact, a historical accident that has no bearing on the truth of modern science itself. That is a function of its commitment to reason and experimental verification, which men and women everywhere accept. The same is true of the ideas of democratic government and human rights. Their Western origins do not contribute one iota to their legitimacy. We acknowledge their authority not *because* they are Western. That has nothing to do with it. We acknowledge their authority because they express the universal moral and political aspirations of all humankind, and though the West has done some terrible things in the name of these aspirations, and has selfishly exploited their appeal, that is no reason to impeach their authority, which rests on transcendent foundations.

“A product of modern European civilization, studying any problem of universal history, is bound to ask himself to what combination of circumstances the fact should be attributed that in Western civilization, and in Western civilization only, cultural phenomena have appeared which (as we like to think) lie in a line of development having *universal* significance and validity.”<sup>28</sup> This observation remains as true today as when Max Weber made it in 1920. It has been, we might say, the peculiar fate of Europe to be the homeland of a set of ideas and institutions whose universal validity (to use Weber’s term) is no longer conditioned on anything peculiarly European. In that sense, it is not only appropriate but necessary to speak of the privileged position of Western civilization, understanding by this the unique place which the civilization that began in the West but now rests on universal moral and intellectual foundations occupies among the civilizations of the world. The ideas and institutions of the West, liberated from the accidental limits of their historical beginnings, have become the common possession of humanity.

They form the basis of today's planetary civilization, with its startling achievements, great hopes, and glaring failures.

If the strong version of multiculturalism denies this claim, it not only denies the most obvious and basic facts of life, as we experience them everyday, buying coffee, reading the newspaper, riding the bus, engaging in political debate, visiting the doctor. It also denies the ideals we espouse with the greatest strength and conviction—those of human rights and democracy, for example, and of scientific enquiry unfettered by ideological and religious constraints. Outside the classroom, we recognize these facts and endorse these ideals. If the embrace of a multiculturalism that insists on the equality of all the world's civilizations and that denies any claim to priority on behalf of the West requires that we deny these facts and ideals in the classroom, the result will not be that we really give them up. They are too deeply rooted in our experience and belief for that. The result will be that the classroom in which they are denied or disparaged is covered with a pall of self-deception, of disingenuous pretense, and thereby loses its credibility as a forum for the discussion of the deepest questions, which always demand the greatest candor and the courage that candor allows.

Among these is the question of what living is for. To the extent that teachers of the humanities still claim any responsibility for asking this question, and any authority to provide help in exploring it, their enthusiastic embrace of a multiculturalism which in its extreme version asserts the equality of all cultures and traditions makes their classrooms a less credible place to pursue this or any other question of real importance. It puts teachers who embrace this idea at odds with what their students know to be the truth about the world and with their own deepest moral and political convictions. It

presents itself as candid talk about the illegitimacy of Western ideas and institutions, but its real effect is to undermine the respect that students have for the candor of those teachers who, in the name of a more rigorous honesty, ask them to deny facts that honesty compels them to acknowledge and values it demands they affirm. This cannot help but make the classroom in which such talk is presented as the truth seem a less honest and serious place. In class, students may enthusiastically affirm the multiculturalism their teachers espouse. They may even feel, for the moment, that they believe it. But underneath they know they don't, and this deeper knowledge undermines the authority of the teachers who defend such ideas and the disciplines on whose behalf they speak.

In disciplines like physics and economics, which are untroubled by the suggestion that the Western approach to their subject-matter is only one among many, inherently no better or truer than any other, no such dissonance exists to compromise their claims to authority. Only the humanities are in this compromised position. Only the humanities have embraced a multiculturalism that drains them of their authority by putting them at war with the experiential and moral worlds their students inhabit outside the classroom. The question of the purpose and value of life demands as much honesty as one can muster. It is a difficult question to ask, let alone answer, in an honest way. But to approach it in any other spirit is already to fail. It is to relinquish the one thing necessary for a meaningful engagement with the question. Through their forced denial of what their students otherwise know and believe, under the influence of a multiculturalism inspired by political and moral ambitions that are themselves of Western origin, teachers of the humanities who deny the priority of the West and of its values forfeit their claim to the

honesty that an engagement with the question of life's meaning demands and, with that, their authority to lead their students in the search for an answer to it.



Diversity and multiculturalism are ideas that have been importantly shaped by moral and political events outside the academy. Constructivism, by contrast, is a concept that has its origins in the world of ideas, in intellectual debates about the character and limits of human knowledge—in the branch of philosophical inquiry known as epistemology. Its sources include Kant's transcendental idealism; Nietzsche's perspectivism and his notion of the will to power; Foucault's account of knowledge as a technique of control; Marx's analysis of the "superstructure" of ideas; Wittgenstein's anti-metaphysical philosophy of language; and the writings of the American pragmatists (Dewey and Pierce in particular). Some defenders of constructivism (Richard Rorty, for example)<sup>29</sup> have treated these sources with subtlety and respect. But it is a simpler and less careful version of the concept that has had the greatest influence in the humanities. To those with some knowledge of the history of modern philosophy and a first-hand acquaintance with the texts to which the proponents of this simpler version of constructivism appeal, their ideas are likely to seem a caricature of the more complex ones these texts express. But it is this cruder version that has had the widest currency in the humanities and been most often deployed, with destructive effect, in support of multiculturalism and of the claim that racial,

gender, and ethnic diversity is crucial to the work of these disciplines.<sup>30</sup> It is this cruder version of constructivism that has provided the philosophical foundations for the culture of political correctness that has dominated the humanities for the past forty years.

In its simplest form, constructivism asserts that the human world—the whole of reality, including the natural world, insofar as it has any meaning for us at all—is an artifact constructed by the human beings who inhabit it (hence “constructivism”). It therefore regards any claim that some feature of this world exists “by nature” or has an independent “essence” we are bound to respect as necessarily false. For a constructivist, all claims of this sort are projections onto the human world of a false necessity that belies the true generative freedom of the activity of meaning-making from which this world derives its very existence as a realm of meanings.<sup>31</sup>

Constructivism further insists that this activity of meaning-making receives its motive and direction from a desire to assert power and control over someone or something (oneself, others, or the world). It maintains that the construction of the human world is in this sense always interest-driven and that those who appeal to the false necessity of “nature” and the “essence” of things do so in order to advance the interests that motivate their appeal—which, despite appearances, must itself be understood as just another interest-based construction.

Constructivists claim that the aim of intellectual analysis, in the humanities especially, is to expose these motives, to bring them out of the darkness of falsehood and deception (including self-deception) and into the light of critical understanding. And finally, they insist that this process of intellectual enlightenment neither

depends upon nor yields criteria for ranking the relative worth of the meanings that human beings make or of the desires that drive them to do so.

Defenders of this view of course acknowledge that we judge some human artifacts to be better or more beautiful, even more truthful, than others—that we distinguish among political systems, moral codes, philosophical ideas, and works of art on the basis of their value. Rankings of this sort are unavoidable. It is hard to imagine how we could function without them. But they argue that an enlightened person knows he cannot justify his rankings on the ground that they conform to the “nature” or “essence” of things, and recognizes that even enlightenment itself does not yield a standard by which the value of different human ideas and arrangements can be objectively measured. He knows that his rankings, like those of anyone else, spring from a source outside the process of enlightenment and anterior to it—from his interests, which precede his value judgments and give rise to them, not the other way around. And if enlightenment itself produces some change in a person’s interests, that is not because he has attained a vantage point outside them from which their “true” worth can be assessed, but only because he has acquired new (intellectual) interests that modify or displace his old ones. From this it follows that disagreements about the justice or beauty or truth of some feature of the world and what value to assign it can never in reality be anything but a declaration or display of the disputants’ interests, which fall outside the domain of argumentative justification and are only concealed (often for strategic reasons) by appeals to reason, nature, and the like.

This connected set of ideas forms the core of the crude version of constructivism that has had so much influence in the humanities,

and it is easy to see why it has often been invoked in support of multiculturalism. For if there is no inherent—no “natural”—rank order among the different cultures of the world, then any claim that there is can only be a false and disguised expression of interest whose ability to command assent is a function of the force behind it rather than the reasons to which it appeals. Those, in particular, who make such claims on behalf of the West are only, on this view, engaged in a species of power politics. One must see through their claims to the desires that lie behind them. One must recognize that resistance to the asserted superiority of Western ideas and values is itself a political act that contributes to the larger campaign to rid the world of colonial oppression. For those who hold this view, there can be only one way of treating the world’s cultures and traditions, and that is to put them all on a par and to insist that any attempt to rank them is an interest-driven act of self-aggrandizement on the part of those attempting to do so. Multiculturalism is the idea that states the politics of this position and constructivism the theory that provides its philosophical support. The political and moral appeal of the first is an important source of the intellectual attraction of the second, and vice versa.



Constructivism is of course controversial and has often been attacked, especially by defenders of so-called “traditional” values—by those who insist that there are objectively, essentially, naturally better and worse values and institutions.<sup>32</sup> The defenders of traditional values affirm the existence and importance of something that can

meaningfully be called human “nature” and generally denounce constructivism as nihilistic, which it is if one understands nihilism to be not the denial that values exist but the denial of the possibility of providing a rational foundation for them, of ever escaping the determining influence of the pre-rational desires that give our values their content and force.

But this line of attack, though it has certainly had many articulate proponents, can always be deflected by a defender of constructivism merely by characterizing the attack itself as just one more act of aggression, motivated by the political or other interests of the attacker, and dressed up in such a way as to conceal its true source by claiming a legitimacy grounded in the nature of things. Every external critic of constructivism invites this response. The result is a predictable back and forth: the critics of constructivism attacking it as a nihilistic doctrine that fails to recognize the truths of human nature, constructivists responding that the attack itself is an interest-driven political act that proves their philosophical point, the critics rejoining that this response is further proof of the depth of their opponents’ nihilism, and so on in an endless circle.

The only criticisms of constructivism that cannot be deflected in this way are internal ones—those that seek to show that constructivism is unintelligible on its own terms or supports conclusions different from those its defenders draw.

Let us assume, for example, that the human world *is* an artifact in the sense that constructivism claims—that all the meanings we assign the world are human inventions. Still, the intelligibility of any constructive activity depends on its being carried out in accordance with rules which the person acting is constrained to accept. The employment of these rules—which, were we free to invent and



deploy them as we wished, could no longer perform their constraining function—is (to use Kant’s formulation) a precondition necessary for the possibility of any such act being intelligible at all, to the actor or anyone else.<sup>33</sup> It is a precondition of our being able to think or say anything whatsoever about it.

But to accept this proposition is to acknowledge that the very freedom of our capacity to create meaning depends for its intelligibility—for our recognition of it as an exercise of freedom rather than something else—on a necessity that limits and constrains our freedom from the start, a necessity that is freedom’s coeval enabling partner. And to accept this argument, loosely inspired by Kant (or, if you prefer, by Wittgenstein)<sup>34</sup> is to grant a beachhead of necessity in the otherwise boundless realm of creativity that constructivism presumes, from which other enabling conditions of equal necessity may perhaps be derived through a similar process of transcendental analysis. One may even hope that in the end all these conditions can be gathered and harmonized in a philosophical anthropology that restores a measure of legitimacy to the ancient idea of human nature, now expressed in transcendental rather than metaphysical terms.<sup>35</sup> At a minimum, constructivism gives us no reason to think that the hope of doing this is doomed from the start.

Or (to pursue another internal line of attack), even if every value is the expression of an interest, of a pre-rational passion or desire, certain passions, and all those that are most characteristically human, are distinguished by what philosophers call their “ideality.” These idealizing passions differ from other, simpler feelings and appetites in a crucial respect. They all include an idea of some sort as one of their components. Anger is an example. The angry person feels rage on account of being mistreated. He is angry because he has

not been treated as he should. If he had no notion of how he ought to be treated, he could not be angry. The passion we call anger has built into it as one of its key elements a reference to a standard of proper treatment. This standard is an idea, an abstraction, a thought, and that thought is itself part of what we mean by anger and how we experience it.<sup>36</sup>

Pride is another example. The prideful person takes pleasure in living up to her ideals and in being treated as her status demands. Her pleasure can be conceived only with reference to these ideals. Hope and shame are other idealizing passions. Each of these also refers to an idea that appears as a thought or representation in the mind (or soul) of the person who feels hopeful or ashamed.

The makeup of these passions and desires includes an intellectual component—the imaginative projection of an idea of one kind or another. Indeed, even our most primitive desires typically include a component of this sort, at least in their distinctively human form. Human sexual desire, for example, has an element of fantasy that distinguishes it from the thoughtless sexual appetites of other animals.<sup>37</sup> Animal desires are instinctive. There is (so far as we can tell) no thought in them at all. Some human passions and desires may perhaps be blindly instinctive too, but others, and all the ones that are peculiar to us, are inherently intelligent in the sense that mind—reason, thought, imagination—is a defining feature of them (though a feature that need not be consciously appreciated by the person whose passion or desire it is). And whatever other desires belong to this class of idealizing appetites, the desire a person has to advance his political agenda—the kind of desire that constructivism spies behind all appeals to truth and nature—must surely be included. For every interest of this sort always involves the imaginative projec-

tion of some end to be achieved—the anticipatory representation, in the form of an idea, of some institutional scheme, or distributive outcome, or cultural practice, or other political goal. Every political passion is marked by ideality.

This may seem uncontroversial, but its implications for constructivism are large. For constructivism presupposes a domain of interests, of passions and desires, that is anterior to and independent of the world of thought—of ideas, beliefs, and values. The latter can all be reduced, on the constructivist view of them, to interests of one kind or another. Each is the disguised expression of an interest that itself is deaf and dumb—a brute appetite that can be challenged only by another appetite of the same inarticulate kind in a contest of powers that reason cannot adjudicate because there is no reason in it. But for this view to be defensible, for it even to be intelligible, the realms of thought and interest must be entirely distinct, since otherwise the first cannot be reduced to the second in the way that constructivism requires.

To acknowledge the ideality of certain human passions and desires, however, and especially of those that are most distinctively human, is to deny the sharpness and completeness of this very distinction. It is to acknowledge that thinking—the process of imaginative idealization—is a constituent feature of these passions and desires themselves, whose character cannot be described or understood apart from it. And once that is granted, it is no longer clear how the complete reduction of thought to interest that constructivism assumes can be carried out, for the interests to which our thoughts reduce are in many cases themselves already “thoughtful.” More important, the acknowledgment that thinking is already present in many of our interests—and certainly in those that relate to the

achievement of our moral and political goals—establishes a foothold of thought within the realm of interest and opens the possibility of a reflective, critical review of our passions and desires from a point of view internal to them.<sup>38</sup> Psychoanalysis assumes that even our sexual desires are accessible to an internal review of this kind. If that is true, then surely our political desires, which are even more openly thoughtful, must be subject to internal criticism too.

The constructivist's dismissal of the traditionalist's appeal to reason or nature as just another political move in disguise rests on the assumption that our interests cannot be rationally scrutinized from within, that they are deaf to reason's appeal. It rests on the assumption that reason is, as David Hume remarked, the handmaid of the passions, an "afterthought" that serves our interests and desires but can exercise no influence over them.<sup>39</sup> The recognition that our most characteristically human interests have thought built into them from the start undermines this assumption and clears the way to an internal criticism that wrecks the program of perfect reduction on which the insularity and seeming invulnerability of constructivism depends.

External attacks on constructivism, in the name of reason or nature, are vulnerable to the deflecting response that they beg the question constructivism raises—the question of whether such appeals are ever anything more than expressions of blind interest on the part of those who make them. Internal criticisms, like the two I have just sketched, cannot be deflected in this way. They present a serious, and in the end I think insurmountable, challenge to the crude version of constructivism that has had so many supporters in the humanities. To meet them, constructivism would have to become a philosophically subtler theory. It would have to repudiate

the nihilism that denies the possibility of subjecting our interests and desires to rational review. It would have to acknowledge the role of reason in political and moral debate and in disagreements about the relative value of ideas and institutions. It would have to abandon the claim that any attempt to rank the world's cultures is a political act pure and simple.

In particular, it would have to meet the attempt to establish a privileged place for Western ideas with something more than a wave of the hand. It would have to meet the arguments that support this view with counter-arguments of its own. It would have to come to terms with the fact that constructivism is itself a Western invention whose claim to universality reflects the most characteristic feature of the very tradition it rejects, in the name of a critical philosophy that purports to be unhampered by parochial Western ideas. A constructivism that did this might have greater philosophical appeal. But it could no longer supply the strong if mindless support for multiculturalism that the simple version does and would therefore lack the political appeal it has for many humanities teachers today.



The concept of constructivism, even in its crudest form, shares something important in common with secular humanism, just as the contemporary idea of diversity does. In the case of diversity, the common element is a recognition that values are plural. In the case of constructivism, it is the acknowledgment of the role that free invention plays in the creation of meaning and value. Secular humanism acknowledged a flexibility or freedom in our confrontation

with the irreducibly plural values that appear before us as options for living. Constructivism, which denies that values are compulsory and insists that we are not forced by “nature” or “reason” to prefer one fundamental value to another, likewise puts choice and freedom at the center of our moral and spiritual lives and underscores that it is up to us to decide what meaning and value the world shall have (though constructivism takes back much of the freedom it grants by reducing the choices we make, and the values we affirm, to the driving force of blind interest).

This similarity in their emphasis on freedom and choice might make it seem that constructivism is merely an extension of secular humanism, and an improving one at that. One might conclude that constructivism merely takes ideas that are central to secular humanism and carries them further, freeing them from their limits and bringing the voluntarist spirit of secular humanism to its proper fulfillment. But that is a mistake. For by radically extending the range and power of our freedom, constructivism destroys the value that freedom possesses within a secular humanist framework and prevents any discipline that adopts a constructivist approach from offering helpful guidance in the search for an answer to the question of what we should care about and why.

From the standpoint of secular humanism, the meaning or value of the choice a person makes about such matters depends upon two interdependent conditions. The first is that it be a genuine choice. To the extent it is dictated by someone else, or compelled by the person’s circumstances, to the extent its freedom is compromised or qualified in any of the many ways it can be, its moral and spiritual value is impaired. The second is that it be the choice of something valuable—that it express a commitment to

something worthy of commitment. However free a choice, to the extent its object is unworthy of commitment, the choice lacks value and its deficiency cannot be remedied by searching for a way to make the choice freer still. For this second condition to be fulfilled, the worth of the values a person affirms as the cornerstone of his life cannot be a function merely of the fact that he affirms them. They must have a value that is independent of his choice. They must have an intrinsic worth of their own.

It is true that I must choose what to care about in life and that only what I *choose* to care about can have value or meaning for me. But it is also true that what I choose to care about can have value or meaning only if it is valuable or meaningful in its own right, independent of the choice that I make. Secular humanism insists on both these points. It sets two conditions for success in the search for an answer to the question of life's meaning. Between these two conditions there is, of course, a tension. But the tension creates a dynamic within whose vibrant and unstable field we alone can hope to find an answer to this question that is meaningful both on account of its freedom and the worth of what we freely choose.

If the first requirement is suspended, we relapse into an authoritarianism that leaves little or no room for freedom—that conceives right living to be conformity to a single and unambiguously best pattern of life. But if the second condition is suspended, our choices are drained of their meaning and value by being unmoored from what has meaning and value in itself. The tension that gives our choices their meaning goes slack. There is no longer any point to choosing when the entire value of a choice is achieved in its execution, and the subject-matter of the choice—*what* we choose—is treated with indifference.

This is where constructivism leaves us. By insisting that every invocation of nature or reason, every claim that a work or practice or institution possesses an inherent value of its own, is an appeal to a false necessity that enlightened people know is just a way of amplifying the rhetorical power of a choice that has no foundation in the world: by insisting on this, constructivism eliminates the second condition that gives our choices their meaning and value. It deprives us of everything for the sake of which it might be worth having, and exercising, the freedom we possess.

Secular humanism, with its two conditions, occupies a position midway between classicism (where choice plays no role) and constructivism (which denies that there is anything inherently worthy to choose). If one assumes that this midway position is necessarily unstable, that the chronologically later idea of constructivism cures this instability, and that by doing so it advances beyond secular humanism in the same way that secular humanism advances beyond classicism, the line that leads from classicism to constructivism is likely to seem wholly progressive, each stage being an improvement upon the one before. But in reality, it is only secular humanism, with its admitted instability, that gives due recognition to both of the conditions that are required to form a meaningful response to life's most basic question—that it be a free response, and freely embrace something of intrinsic worth. The second of these conditions is lost in the move from secular humanism to constructivism, which eliminates the tension required for the meaningful exercise of freedom and sets our choices about the most important matters loose from the constraints that alone give them purpose and value.

Classicism offered organized instruction in the meaning of life. But its instruction was *too* organized, for it depended on the (no



longer credible) assumption of a single right way of living. When secular humanism abandoned this assumption, it was able to continue to offer disciplined guidance in the exploration of life's meaning only because the pluralism of values it recognized was finite and (relatively) fixed. This gave secular humanism a structure that made an organized approach to the question of the meaning of life possible, one that followed an intelligible sequence and explored an agreed-upon range of topics through the study of a more-or-less fixed group of works, all on the assumption that there are certain identifiable ways of life that possess intrinsic value. Among these each of us must ultimately choose and there is no built-in rank order that makes one way of life superior to another. But the choice among them is constrained by the manageable number of such lives and by the continuity of the tradition of great works of literature, philosophy, and art in which they are presented and defended: the core of secular humanism.

Constructivism condemns the idea of intrinsic value as a false "essentialism." It derides the notion of a fixed set of perennial options for living. It mocks the idea of a great conversation. It urges us to liberate ourselves from these primitive and freedom-denying beliefs. But once we do, no limits remain on the possibilities to be explored. The very idea of a limit becomes suspect and any attempt to reimpose one is likely to seem an arbitrary exercise of brute power. Without some limits, however, there can be no agreement among teachers of the humanities as to what to study, in which sequence, and through the examination of which works. And without such limits the search for an answer to the question of what living is for becomes a directionless enquiry that provides no structured environment for the exercise of freedom and hence deprives

freedom itself of value. The authority of the humanities to serve as guides in the exploration of the question of the meaning of life depended on their willingness to ask this question when other disciplines had ceased to do so. It also depended on their ability to provide students with some organized help in their search for an answer. The research ideal discouraged teachers of the humanities from asking the question. Constructivism robs them of the means to pursue it in an organized and helpful way.



The ideas of diversity and multiculturalism start from attractive moral and political premises. Each promotes a worthy cause—racial justice in the one case, and responsible global citizenship in the other. By transforming these ideas into principles of pedagogy, teachers of the humanities have been able to reassert their claim to a special and valued role in higher education. They have been able to see themselves as making a distinctive contribution to the moral and political work of their colleges and universities. And by grounding the ideas of diversity and multiculturalism in a constructivist theory of knowledge that emphasizes the depth of human freedom and choice, they have been able to conceive their new role as one that extends a key premise of secular humanism to its fulfilling conclusion.

But all this is a mistake. The real effect of the humanities' endorsement of these ideas has been quite the opposite. It has not restored their authority but further compromised it instead. It has undermined the notion of an old and ongoing conversation that gives each entrant a weighted and responsible sense of connection to

the past, and substituted the egotistic presumption that we can start a new and freer conversation on our own, engaging all the works of all the world's great civilizations in a colloquy we invent for ourselves. It has encouraged the fantasy that in our world today, the ideas and institutions of the West have no more significance or value than those of any other civilization. It has wrecked the humanities' claim to be able to provide organized guidance in the exploration of the question of the meaning of life. And it has simultaneously limited the idea of human freedom by tying our powers of judgment too closely to facts about ourselves we cannot change, and expanded the notion of freedom to the point where our choices are emptied of their meaning. In all these ways, the wide acceptance within the humanities of the ideas of diversity, multiculturalism, and constructivism has made it harder for teachers in these fields to acknowledge the legitimacy of the question of what living is for and to approach it in a serious, responsible, and organized fashion.

At the same time, these ideas have hobbled the humanities with beliefs that have little or no credibility in the natural and social sciences. Unburdened by the assumption that our values are irrevocably linked to race and gender, that all civilizations stand on a moral and intellectual par, and that "truth" and "nature" are political fictions in which we should put no trust, the natural and social sciences proceed from strength to strength, as measured by the research ideal. Their standing is secure. They have been untouched by these ideas, which are antithetical to the spirit of objectivity on which the research ideal depends.

None of these developments, of course, has made the question of the meaning of life any less urgent for the young men and women studying in our colleges and universities. The question has simply

been forced out of school. Disciplines other than the humanities no longer pretend to address it, and the humanities themselves have lost their willingness and ability to do so—first, by subscribing to the modern research ideal and then, in a failed effort to reestablish some sense of distinctive purpose, by embracing a set of ideas that have made the question even more remote than it was before. Students looking for guidance in their encounter with the question of life's meaning must now look elsewhere for help.

Most students naturally turn to their families and friends. They turn to those with whom they have the most intimate and caring relations. Whatever help one gets from other sources, the affection and support of those one lives with and loves is for most of us essential to maintaining our balance in the face of life's mysteries. But our families and friends are rarely *authorities* in the exploration of life's meaning. They seldom possess a method or organized body of knowledge that enables them to approach the subject in a disciplined way. In any case, that is not what we want from or value about them. What we want is their love, and the fact that they are in no better position than anyone else to provide organized guidance in our investigation of the meaning of life does not decrease the value of their love by an atom. What it does do, however, is give most of us a reason to look elsewhere for such guidance—which, though never a substitute for the love of family and friends, is always a useful and often an essential complement to it.

Our colleges and universities once claimed to possess such authority. One of the reasons that young people went to college—or more accurately, one of the reasons their families sent them to college—was to study the question of life's meaning under the supervision of teachers competent to guide them. This was rarely the only

reason for going. There were always other (often clearer and stronger) reasons as well. But the moral and spiritual benefits of a disciplined introduction to the question of what living is for were among the advantages a college education promised. They were part of why one went.

It has never been the case, of course, that our colleges and universities were the *only* institutions purporting to provide authoritative instruction in the meaning of life. Religious institutions in particular have always claimed to do so. The question of life's meaning lies at the heart of every religious tradition. It has always been the central question to which religious thought and the institutionalized forms of religious belief are addressed. For them, the question of life's meaning is constitutive: they could not put it aside, or disclaim the authority to address it, without losing their religious character and becoming institutions of a different kind.

During the first two centuries of American higher education, college and church were nearly synonymous. After the Civil War and during the century that followed, they drew apart and became separate, sometimes competing, centers of authority so far as the provision of instruction in the meaning of life was concerned. When the tradition of secular humanism collapsed and the humanities gave up their claim to such authority, the competitive tension between college and church disappeared, and our churches remained the only institutions still claiming the right and duty to address this question in an authoritative way. Today, if one wants organized assistance in answering the question of life's meaning, and not just the love of family and friends, it is to the churches that one must turn.

The different religious traditions have old, deep, and well-worked-out approaches to the question of life's meaning. These

retain, even in a world of increasingly secular habits, an immense reserve of authority and prestige. But these traditions, as different as they are in other respects, share two features that set them apart from the approach to the question of the meaning of life that secular humanism encouraged.

First, no religion can be pluralist in the deep and final sense that secular humanism is. No religion can accept the proposition that there are incommensurably different answers to the question of life's meaning, among which no rank order can be fixed. A religion may be (more or less) tolerant, but every religion must, in the end, answer the question of the meaning of life decisively. It must offer and defend one answer as the best, and however complex that answer is, however insistent that we tolerate the answers others give, it must conceive the variety of human life and human striving from the standpoint of some unitary conception of meaning and value. A religion that denies the very possibility of attaining such a standpoint, as secular humanism does, is no longer a religion at all.

Second, every religion at some point demands a "sacrifice of the intellect." This point may come sooner or later, but every religion eventually reaches it. Every religion insists that at some point thinking is no longer adequate to the question of life's meaning, and that further progress can be made only by means other than thought. All religions recognize the finitude of human reason, as secular humanism does. But in contrast to secular humanism, every religion also affirms the existence and spiritual value of some attitude other than thought that has the power to carry us beyond the limits of reason if we are prepared to adopt it. And all declare that the deepest peace and greatest insight come when we take this step beyond

reason's frontiers and open ourselves to the wisdom that "surpasseth understanding."<sup>40</sup>

All religions differ from secular humanism in these two respects: that they cannot accept its ultimate pluralism of values and demand the recognition of spiritual powers that transcend the limits of reason (whether these powers be conceived in mystical, devotional, or other terms). These two features of religious thought and practice are well captured by one of the many meanings of the word "fundamentalist." Today, this word is most often used to distinguish certain religious attitudes from others—to distinguish fundamentalist Islam from non-fundamentalist Islam, fundamentalist Christianity from non-fundamentalist Christianity, and so on. But there is a more basic sense in which every religion is fundamentalist. For every religion insists, at the end of the day, that there is only one right answer to the question of life's meaning, however tolerant it is prepared to be of the answers others give, either for reasons of convenience or out of a moral respect that itself is anchored in its own answer to this question. Every religion must ultimately insist on a fundament of meaning and value. And every religion must also insist that while reason alone cannot provide a foundation for answering the question of life's meaning—that we cannot, so to speak, argue our way to a demonstrably right answer—something else can. Every religion affirms that there is something else—faith, mystical union with the godhead, the discipline of prayer, something—that can provide us with the fundament we need to secure our answer to the question of the meaning of life against all criticism and doubt. In these two respects, every religion, even the most tolerant, is fundamentalist.

The fact that America's colleges and universities no longer claim the authority to provide organized instruction in the exploration of this question therefore means that the most influential institutions now doing so are religious ones and that nearly all such instruction today starts from the fundamentalist premises on which every religion is based.<sup>41</sup> Our colleges and universities have ceased to be independent centers of authority asserting the right and ability to offer young people guidance in exploring the question of life's meaning from a non-fundamentalist perspective—from the perspective of a secular humanism that acknowledges the ultimate pluralism of values, while insisting on the intelligibility of the idea of human nature and the durability of its most compelling expressions. Our colleges and universities have abandoned this position and by doing so ceded the enterprise of instruction in life's meaning to the religious institutions with which they once shared it in a competitive division of authority. The churches alone now occupy the field. They alone claim such authority and exercise it. Hence, in the organized provision of instruction in the meaning of life, fundamentalism now prevails in America without competitive challenge—fundamentalism not in the narrow sense in which the word is sometimes used to designate particular religious attitudes or orthodoxies but in the deeper and more consequential sense in which every religion, whatever its temper and doctrine, starts from a fundament of belief that secular humanism investigates, interrogates, takes with utmost seriousness, but refuses to embrace.

For a century, the humanities departments of our colleges and universities offered a competitive challenge to fundamentalism, supported by the tradition of secular humanism. The destruction of that tradition has left those looking for instruction in the meaning



of life nowhere to turn but the churches. It has left them with no meaningful alternative to fundamentalism—with a choice between fundamentalism and no instruction at all. When the humanities lost confidence in their capacity to provide such instruction and severed their connection to the question of what living is for, they therefore not only jeopardized their own standing within the academy. They not only cast doubt on their own educational purpose and value. They also caused a dangerous and damaging contraction of intellectual and spiritual possibilities within the culture at large by leaving the question of life's meaning in the nearly exclusive possession of those with fundamentalist beliefs.

Our churches no longer compete with our colleges and universities for the authority to speak to this question. Some undoubtedly view this as a good thing. They believe that such authority belongs only to God's delegates and that once our colleges and universities ceased to be religious institutions themselves, they forfeited the right to claim it. They believe that secular humanism in particular, with its commitment to pluralism and refusal to affirm the power of faith, provides no rightful basis for this claim. They believe that our schools should limit themselves to scholarly research and to the transmission of specialized knowledge in specific fields of study and should leave the question of what living is for to others. They see the absence of this question from the long list of those to which our colleges and universities offer an organized response as a desirable state of affairs that reflects their incompetence to answer it.

What this view ignores is the vital importance of having a credible counterweight to fundamentalism itself—one that takes the question of life's meaning as earnestly as religion does but starts its exploration from premises different from those on which all

religiously-inspired instruction is based. For without a spiritually vital alternative to fundamentalism—one that takes the deepest concerns of the human soul with equal seriousness but refuses to concede what every religion demands—our churches become weaker on account of not having to defend themselves against a challenger of consequence. Without such an alternative, our whole culture is spiritually impoverished and debate about matters of ultimate concern degenerates into what it often is today—a shouting match marked by mistrust and incomprehension. Without a real alternative to fundamentalism, those who want some organized help in thinking about the meaning of their lives but, for whatever reason, reject the authority of the churches to provide it, are left to wrestle with the question on their own as best they can. Without the credible counterweight to fundamentalism that secular humanism provides, our spiritual world is flattened and privatized. It becomes shallower and less demanding. And the one question in which we all have an interest—a common human interest—is forced back into the realm of private life for all but those who accept the authority of religion to guide them in their examination of it.

The humanities' embrace of the modern research ideal, the confusion and anxiety this produced, and the desperate search for a new sense of purposefulness organized around a set of politically attractive but intellectually ruinous ideas, has left these disciplines in disrepair, with no clear understanding of the contribution they make to higher education. It has destroyed the confidence they once possessed, and the authority they once exercised, as custodians of the tradition of secular humanism, which for a century after the rise of the American university enabled the humanities to continue, on

more pluralistic and skeptical terms, the older tradition of offering instruction in the meaning of life.

For these disciplines themselves, the result has been disastrous. But for the wider culture, which has been deprived of a strong and independent center where such instruction might be sought, and been left with no organized alternative to religious fundamentalism, the consequences are even worse. Today, the restoration of the humanities to a position of authority in our colleges and universities is a matter of signal importance not just for those who teach in these fields, not just for higher education, but for our culture as a whole, whose spiritual vibrancy has been compromised by the self-destruction of the humanities. For our culture to be strong, the humanities must be strong. The tradition of secular humanism must be reclaimed. The question of what living is for must be restored to a respected place in our colleges and universities. And the authority of teachers of the humanities to guide their students in answering this question must be reaffirmed, above all by these teachers themselves.