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*Response to the Presidential Address*

THE ACADEMIC PHARMAKON:  
IN DEFENSE OF LIBERAL EDUCATION

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Kevin Gary's spirited defense of orators and prophets speaks to a contemporary problem so acute that I suspect there isn't a person in this room who hasn't questioned his or her own role in academia. What worries Gary so is that he thinks our consumer paradise is a sham; it may temporarily lull us to sleep but it cannot fundamentally alter our underlying "state of unhappy disquiet." Gary's main target today is not our culture or general malaise, but the academy's response. He argues that the standard conception of a liberal education espoused by Max Weber and the AACU is built on the illusions of personal autonomy, critical thought, and liberal neutrality. He offers us an alternative third way.

The standard liberal education that Gary rejects evokes a familiar story. Student A enters the University largely shaped by the accidents of her birth. Teachers convince Student A to set aside all her inherited and unexamined values and traditions in order to explore (imaginatively) the broader world and the wide variety of ways to think and live within it. Everything Student A encounters is subjected to critical scrutiny. Gradually, Student A builds an identity and vision of the good life with the fragments of cultures, values, and traditions encountered along the way. Student A exits school a different—in fact better—person. That is, even if Student A begins a Catholic and leaves a Catholic, the latter state of being Catholic is qualitatively different since it is now the product of a meaningful, informed choice made after an extended period of critical engagement with other traditions.

Gary thinks this story is both naïve and ultimately destructive as it is rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of our human nature. In fact, we find ourselves in a state of alienation that no Great Conversation could possibly cure.

Gary turns to the wisdom traditions that treat liberal education as a way of life, transforming not just the head but the heart and gut. Rather than constitute trite clichés, the quasi-spiritual practices of these traditions serve to provide a pathway "to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires."<sup>1</sup> But even this is inadequate for the situation in which we find ourselves today. As David Foster Wallace suggests, the eternal battle with our solipsistic self is endless and

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 103.

exhausting and in conflict with our day-in-and-day-out experience of being at the center of it all. More drastic measures are needed.<sup>2</sup>

What I hope to do here is provide a modest defense of the standard model of liberal education represented by Max Weber. I will then argue that this model is just good enough—and preferable to Gary’s third way.

Weber’s stance can be roughly summarized as follows: While the university may benefit from its share of talented orators and leaders, it is for good reason that the faculty’s main qualifications consist in the depth of its disciplinary expertise and willingness to initiate students to its virtues.<sup>3</sup> We should be wary of teachers as prophets and should refuse to make final conclusions about the ultimate meaning of life.

The first argument in defense of the standard liberal education is that the ideals of autonomy, critical thought, and neutrality—while technically false—turn out to be noble fictions that reflect some general truths about human nature. As such, these ideals are still worthy of our pursuit.

Let’s start with *autonomy*. No one, including Weber, believes that we are fully autonomous in the strict sense of self-government without any external pressures. A more common and defensible understanding of autonomy forms the basis of most ethical philosophies. Simply stated, we think and act autonomously when we respond to our own reasons and purposes rather than merely react to external forces or circumstances. A more demanding form of autonomy would include freedom from all internal pressures that render us slaves to our desires or blind to our prejudices.

We know from Hans-Georg Gadamer and others that this ideal is never fully realizable—we cannot fully escape from our prejudices. Nevertheless, most of us (rightly) differentiate between different levels of autonomy and commend the pursuit of its ideals.

That autonomy depends on *critical thinking*—the ability to reflect and correctly assess one’s situation—is clear enough. Desires, argues John Dewey, are the “ultimate moving springs of action,” but it is only when we stop, think and act with purpose that we live with a measure of intellectual freedom.<sup>4</sup> Even Wallace, while not sharing Dewey’s sanguine view of freedom, espouses an educational ideal that is awfully close to autonomous critical thought. He writes:

I have come gradually to understand that the liberal arts cliché about teaching you how to think is actually shorthand for a

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<sup>2</sup> David Foster Wallace, “This is Water” (commencement address, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, May 21, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans., H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 129–56.

<sup>4</sup> John Dewey, “Experience and Education,” in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 13, 1938–1939 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 45.

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much deeper, more serious idea: learning how to think really means learning how to *exercise some control over how and what you think*. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how you construct meaning from experience.<sup>5</sup>

While there are limits to what critical thought can be expected to do, as Gary makes clear, it is hard to conceive of a liberal education without it.

Of all the liberal ideals, *neutrality* is probably the most maligned—and for good reason. Colorblindness and other smug claims of neutrality often mask insidious forms of inequality and discrimination. Yet we should not give up on the ideal entirely. A more defensible function of neutrality is not to champion some morally suspect relativism or objectivism. Instead it is a call to proceed with caution, admitting the limits of our own knowledge and the possibility that our interlocutors are right. It is a form of humility as old as Socrates that compels us to welcome dialogue and refuse to cease questioning ourselves and others. This, it strikes me, is a necessary virtue for any liberal education.

Of course, what we have here are half-truths at best—they are ideals that cannot be fully achieved by human beings. But I would argue that however insufficient these ideals might be, they are necessary for the cultivation of a healthy and rigorous education. Liberal teachers must proceed “as if” some form of autonomy, critical thought, and neutrality were possible just as philosophers and theologians who deny free will continue to hold people accountable for their actions. Refuse to do so, and a disastrous fate is preordained.

One might wonder where adherence to these noble fictions leads us? My second defense of a standard liberal education is that its contributions are not insignificant. Weber lists three. There is the obvious contribution to technology—the controlling of our external environments and calculations of our actions. Liberal teaching also imparts us with methods of thinking and training for thought that lead us to greater clarity about ourselves and the world. Finally, while teachers cannot provide final answers to the questions of worldviews, they are not exactly silent about them either. If they are working in the humanities, addressing different aesthetic, ethical, and cultural perspectives is par for the course.

“The primary task of a useful teacher,” writes Weber, “is to teach his students to recognize ‘inconvenient’ facts . . . facts that are inconvenient for their party opinions.”<sup>6</sup> A teacher might point to possibilities, illuminate choices and consequences, and if competent, she can also “force the individual, or at least

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<sup>5</sup> Wallace, “This is Water.”

<sup>6</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 147.

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[she] can help him, to give himself an *account of the ultimate meaning of his own conduct*.”<sup>7</sup>

Humboldt goes even further, though he too stops short of Gary’s third way. The university, he suggests, should unify Research and Teaching to constitute a place where students can live with ideas.<sup>8</sup> This is something more than cultivating skills for vocational purposes. Students’ characters are formed through a process of *Bildung*, the continual exposure to new perspectives whereby one distances oneself from “the immediacy of desire, of personal need, and private interest”<sup>9</sup> and “keep[s] oneself open to what is other—to other, more universal points of view.”<sup>10</sup>

Far removed from the sterile value clarification movement of Kohlberg, this approach entails more than abstract philosophizing; it demands no less than a new formation of character and community. While master pianists, esteemed historians, literature professors, and philosophers of education do not provide their students with a full-fledged worldview, they most certainly initiate students to the virtues and goods of their vocation.

Each discipline has its own quasi-spiritual exercises that bring together the mind and body, reason and desire, individual and community. If they are good teachers, there is no lack of passion, fellowship, or even participation in the freedom that Wallace describes as “attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.”<sup>11</sup>

This disciplinary approach was strong in Wallace’s own teaching. Rather than preach about Ultimate Ends, Wallace sought to introduce students to the world of writers. His *Creative Nonfiction* syllabus from Pomona College reads:

In the grown-up world, creative nonfiction is not *expressive* writing but rather *communicative* writing. And an axiom of communicative writing is that the reader does not automatically care about you (the writer), nor does she find you fascinating as a person, nor does she feel a deep natural interest in the same things that interest you. The reader, in fact, will feel about you, your subject, and your essay only what your written words themselves induce her to feel.

Wallace goes on to say: You don’t miss class, you turn in your work on time, you attend to the exercises that will help you improve as a writer “not just by writing a lot and receiving detailed criticism but also by becoming a more

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 152, emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup> Johan Östling, *Humboldt and the Modern German University: An Intellectual History* (Stockholm: Lund University Press), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>11</sup> Wallace, “This is Water.”

sophisticated and articulate critic of other writers' work."<sup>12</sup> Grades will be based on "presentation" by which he means "evidence of care, of facility in written English, and of empathy for your readers."<sup>13</sup> He adds: "'Creative' or not, [this] is an upper-division writing class, and work that appears sloppy or semiliterate will not be accepted for credit."<sup>14</sup> In another class, he encourages his students to approach an assortment of novels from Baldwin to Brautigan from "a variety of different critical, theoretical, and ideological perspectives, too, depending on students' backgrounds and interests. In essence, we can talk about whatever you wish to—provided that we do it cogently and well."<sup>15</sup>

One might wonder what, besides an initiation to the writer's world, do students gain in his and other classes that could counterbalance our "impatient, impetuous, and restive" consumer culture.<sup>16</sup> Gary is certainly right that "living with ideas" in literature, history, and philosophy does not mean one takes to heart those ideas or applies them to one's adult life. And this also applies to the AA community portrayed in *Infinite Jest*.<sup>17</sup> One can go through life without seriously considering what one's actions mean, as Kierkegaard loved to point out to his Lutheran brethren. Gary's third way assumes the likelihood of such a conclusion. In fact, going through the motions without understanding might be just what the doctor ordered.

The final argument in defense of the standard liberal education is simply that there is no better alternative. A prophet believes she is in possession of infinite truths that must be imparted to her audience. The appeal to emotions and the alignment of habits are the means to a predetermined end. It is the "intellectual sacrifice," states Weber, that is the "decisive characteristic of the positively religious man."<sup>18</sup> While Gary would certainly resist the prophet label, his argument does require a leap of faith.

Yet there is nothing I can say here that will categorically disprove his diagnosis or cure. But if he is correct, we are left with a strange model for liberal education. The AA method turns on the realization that addiction cannot be overcome through rational thought alone. This is a profound insight. The decisive move of the addict is to submit to something beyond himself. Wallace describes this philosophy as follows:

The bitch of the thing is you have to want to. If you don't want to do as you're told—I mean as it's suggested you do—it means that your own personal will is still in control, and

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<sup>12</sup> David Foster Wallace, "Teaching Materials," in *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2014), 622.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 625.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 626.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 609.

<sup>16</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor* (New York: Open University Press, 2005), 37.

<sup>17</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Bay Back Books, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Weber, "Science as a Vocation," 154.

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Eugenio Martinez over at Ennet House never tires of pointing out that your personal will is the web your Disease sits and spins in, still. The will you call your own ceased to be yours as of who knows how many Substance-drenched years ago. It's now shot through with the spidered fibrosis of your Disease. His own experience's term for the Disease is: The Spider. You have to Starve the Spider.<sup>19</sup>

Given these realities, it is understandable why one would readily give up the right to freedom and autonomy. The "Losses" of living with addiction cut you off from all meaningful relationships and goals. Left alone with the Spider, you have little basis for critical thought. In such desperate situations, the community of faith acts as a shepherd, giving respite from thinking too much. It also initiates one into the practice of being sober.

I think we can all relate on some level to a variety of ways our rationality can and will fail us. But is this an accurate metaphor for the situation we find ourselves in? I believe things are not so dire.

Of course, I could be wrong. For those who see our culture and politics as irredeemably depraved, the standard liberal trust in the individual to understand her own predicament and do something about it seems misplaced. It is tempting, in fact, to resort to the old *False Consciousness* gambit. Deep down inside, you are not what you think you are. If you only do as I say, you can break free from the chains and finally become your true self. This is a familiar move utilized by prophets of all ideological stripes.

And this is all for the good, I think. It is well within the sphere of liberal education to debate these very possibilities and to give the more compelling or insightful prophets a place on our soap box. After all, who can deny that our society is ill?

For those who want prophets rather than professors, there is no shortage of examples of social injustice or ways in which our culture is bankrupt. I am particularly fond of Wallace's 1990 description of the rut we find ourselves in. "Television," he writes, "offers way more than a distraction. In a lot of ways, it purveys and enables *dreams*, and most of these dreams involve some sort of transcendence of average daily life." TV "life is quicker, denser, more interesting, more . . . well, *lively* than contemporary life as Joe Briefcase knows it. This might seem benign until we consider that what good old average Joe Briefcase does more than almost anything else in contemporary life is watch television, an activity which anyone with an average brain can see does not make for a very dense and lively life."<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, Wallace sees the high-minded diatribes against TV as a pathetic, even pointless, form of cultural critique, one that is easily

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<sup>19</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 357.

<sup>20</sup> David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," in *The David Foster Wallace Reader* (New York: Bay Back Books, 2014), 672.

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neutralized by TV's ingenious embrace of "self-conscious irony." The trap is tight. For this, he states, "we are responsible because nobody is holding any weapons on us forcing us to spend amounts of time second only to sleep doing something that is, when you come right down to it, not good for us."<sup>21</sup>

In this political climate, it is natural for all of us to wonder if we are doing enough. The effects of the standard liberal education are slow and unpredictable. But it is important to remember what we can and cannot do. The Crocodiles—those AA elders in Wallace's novel—earned their authority in the trenches. Ours rests in our ability to know and represent our fields well. We are scholars and teachers who can do little more than occasionally acclimate our students to inconvenient facts and expose them to critical works—works that are well-crafted, ring true (to some of us), and provide a compelling way to gain clarity about our world and our place in it.

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<sup>21</sup> Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 670–71.

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