

A Reply to John Searle and Other Traditionalists

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In an article entitled *Traditionalists & Their Challengers*,¹ John Searle says there is “supposed to be a major debate” in the universities as to whether liberal education should be replaced with multiculturalism.² He finds this debate “puzzling,” “disappointing,” even “depressing.” By dividing academia into two groups, the so-called “defenders of the tradition” and their “challengers,” Searle says he hopes to “expose some common core assumptions of each side...by stating naively, the traditionalists’ view of higher education and equally naively, the most obvious of the challengers’ objections to it.”³ Despite such claims to offer an even-handed approach to the debate, Searle unfairly and inaccurately represents challengers’ assumptions.

Like other traditionalists, Searle believes something will be lost if changes are made to the canon. A “standard” will be lowered, or worse—eliminated, if we make adjustments here. According to the traditionalists, there is a “body of works of philosophy, literature, history, and art that goes from the Greeks right up to the present day...[w]e call this the Western intellectual tradition.”⁴ The debate turns on an objection to this “tradition”; challengers argue that it is too restrictive, too exclusive, and not open to new membership. When you look closely at the canon, you immediately notice that it is comprised of almost nothing but dead, White, European males.

For all his “best efforts,”⁵ Searle presents the challengers’ position in such a weak way that no sane person would accept it. While some errors are more egregious than others, Searle’s list of challengers’ assumptions expose a misplaced belief that he and other traditionalists share: challengers pose a threat to higher

education. The threat comes in many different forms; Searle lists seven:

1. Too much emphasis is placed on subgroups and culture. This comes at the expense of “standard” interpretations of history, social/political movements, etc.
 2. There is the threat that if we accept *all* cultures as equal we shall slip into “cultural relativism.”
 3. The belief that *every* culture must be represented.
 4. Education is political. It is an attempt to make students share the same political views as those of the instructor.
 5. Challengers have no objective standards. (Another threat posed by relativism.)
 6. In the academy, a marriage exists between left-wing politics and anti-rationalism.
- And finally,
7. The belief that Western civilization is oppressive.

I’d like to consider many of these assumptions/threats in some detail and show where traditionalists like Searle are in error.

Subgroup Matters

1. *The subgroup into which you were born—your ethnic, racial, class, and gender background—matters enormously; it is important for education.*⁶

Searle is correct, challengers do believe the subgroup you were born into matters, it may even “matter enormously,” but only to the extent that it has previously been *excluded* from discussion and consideration. Searle succeeds in distorting the challengers’ assumption here by not fully explaining *why* it matters. It matters because not every group has had the same opportunity at an education. It matters because historically, your ethnic, racial, class, and/or gender background

were the very reasons people were denied an education.

“Encourag[ing] self-definition by ethnicity, race, gender, or class,” says Searle, “has not been part of the theory of what the university was trying to do.”⁷ But Searle either overlooks or simply ignores the fact that “encouragement of self-definition” may be necessary in places where simply teaching information is not enough.⁸ In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks recounts how she “lost her love of school” when encouragement of self-definition was removed.

School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-Black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved. It was no longer connected to anti-racist struggle. Bussed to White schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority...Now, we were mainly taught by White teachers whose lessons reinforced racist stereotypes. For Black children, education was no longer about the practice of freedom. Realizing this, I lost my love of school.⁹

Searle also overlooks the obvious fact that “encouragement of self-definition” was never promoted in the universities because an implicit framework was already in place. Historically, students who attended the academy were predominantly White males; their encouragement, if they needed any, was simply by being around *other White males*.

By dismissing the “encouragement of self-definition” approach to education in favor of what hooks calls the “information-based” approach, Searle fails to appreciate how this serves to reinforce dominate/submissive roles that have plagued us for centuries.¹⁰ Students from minority groups

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(ethnic, racial, class, and gender) have been told time and time again, implicitly and explicitly, that they are not worthy of education. Sometimes, and in some places, “encouragement of self-definition” is necessary.

Relativism

2. *All cultures are equal.*

5. *No such things as objective standards.*

I’ve grouped these two assumptions together because Searle makes a similar distortion in both. Challengers, he says, assume that all cultures are morally equal.¹¹ Closely aligned with this assumption is a disregard for objectivity.¹² Both assumptions point to a form of relativism.¹³ The idea is that we can never be certain about anything so it is wrong to take a stand on an issue, especially a moral one. Values and objectives are nothing but expressions of taste, or the conventions of a society, culture, or subculture. What some individuals regard as “right” others will regard as “wrong.” With no independent or external standpoint for saying that one position is better than another, moral standards are just what one particular culture holds at one particular time; these standards can easily change.

Although terribly distorted, there is a kernel of truth to what Searle says. Challengers *do* assume moral standards and theories can (and do) change. There is a plasticity associated with norms, customs, rules; they are *not* absolute. But because something is *not* absolute does not mean we slip into what Richard Rorty has called “vulgar relativism.”¹⁴ Moral standards are relative, but they are relative to the best possible background data we have at the time. In this way our moral standards are objective, but objective in accordance with our best and most reflective practice.

The mistake that Searle promulgates is attributable to a common misunderstanding of antonyms. The antonym of “relative” is “absolute,” *not* “objective.”¹⁵ Knowledge can be both objective *and* relative, e.g., scientific knowledge. Consider for instance, a certain medical treatment that’s shown through well-designed, randomized, clinical trials to be a highly effective treatment for a particular disease. This is a matter of *objective knowledge*; still it is *relative* to available knowledge and technology. In say, 20 years, well-designed, randomized, clinical trials may show that some newer treatment is still more effective than the current treatment.

This same principle applies when we look to cultures and their moral framework.

“There is,” as Isaiah Berlin says, “a world of objective values,” but these values are distinct from *absolute* values. Absolute values are embodied in the Platonic notion that there is something called “The Truth” which is changeless, eternal. This Platonic Truth is not simply a product of 17th century rationalism; enlightened thinkers of the 18th century fomented this thought too. As Berlin explains:

The empiricists of the eighteenth century, impressed by the vast new realms of knowledge opened by the natural sciences...asked themselves why the same methods should not succeed in establishing similar irrefutable laws in the realms of human affairs. With the new methods discovered by natural science, order could be introduced into the social sphere as well—uniformities could be observed, hypotheses formulated and tested by experiment; laws could be based on them, and then laws in specific regions of experience could be seen to be entailed by wider laws; and these in turn to be entailed by still wider laws, and so on upwards, until a great harmonious system, connected by unbreakable logical links and capable of being formulated in precise—that is mathematical terms, could be established.¹⁶

Traditionalists believe in what Stuart Hampshire has called the “doctrine of moral harmony,”¹⁷ a single harmonious scheme of morality. Similar to the 18th century empiricists’ view, the idea is that as we acquire more knowledge, as we improve our reasoning, we will eventually be able to agree on a single set of moral rules and principles.

Despite this optimism, I think freedom and openness of thought preclude it. Freedom and openness will only foster new possibilities, possibilities we cannot imagine right now. As such, it is unlikely these new possibilities will *converge* into “a great harmonious system.” As the history of science and the history of human affairs show, solutions to even the most confounding problems tend to lead to new, unseen problems—perhaps problems never previously considered.

So moral standards are relative, but they do not slip into “vulgar relativity.” Moral standards are relative to the *best possible background data we have at the time*. They are also objective, but objective in accordance with our best and most reflective practice. John Rawls once described this sort of objective knowledge in terms of “provisionally...fixed points,” potentially subject to revision.¹⁸

Representativeness

3. *When it comes to selecting what you should read, representativeness is obviously crucial. In a multicultural educational democracy, every culture must be represented.*¹⁹

This is simply an inaccurate and distorted view of what challengers hold. Inaccurate, because challengers do not insist that “every culture” be represented—this is obviously impossible. Distorted, because traditionalists have confused the issues challengers are actually grappling with here; challengers attempt to overcome racism and cultural bias by showing respect for others and, in turn, underscoring similar *human* values.²⁰

Just as we find with citizens in a pluralist society, a classroom must also be based on the belief that all students, regardless of cultural background, share the same need to develop tolerance, respect, and cross-cultural understanding. John Dewey proposed a principle of education based on two democratic ideals: (1) various points of shared common interest and (2) freer interaction among social groups.²¹ In order to facilitate these ideals, challengers have proposed including writers not traditionally received in the canon—non-traditional writers that are capable of reaching beyond their own ethnic identities towards a higher understanding of what it means to be fully human.

With the following counterfactual, Searle tries to make a point about the composition and representation of faculty members. Imagine we find out that Plato and Aristotle were really Chinese women. From the challengers’ point of view then, “Ms. Plato and Ms. Aristotle would now acquire a new authenticity as genuine representatives of a previously underrepresented minority, and the most appropriate faculty to teach their works would then be Chinese women.”²²

A revelation such as this would undoubtedly warrant a reassessment of their works and perhaps Chinese women might even be asked to teach courses in these areas. However, Searle’s implicit suggestion here is that due to this new information, we will no longer be able to appreciate the works of these philosophers as we once had. If challengers insist Plato and Aristotle are to be taught by Chinese women, from a Chinese perspective, we will lose something; we will lose our traditional reading of these philosophers.

But what would we really lose? Does Searle fear Plato’s theory of forms would

alter over time? Would Aristotle's doctrine of the mean no longer strike the right balance? After making the monumental discovery that these Greek men were really Chinese women, what is the worry if we then scrutinize these works through a new (Chinese) lens? Again, challengers attempt to overcome racism and cultural bias by showing respect for others and, in turn, underscoring similar *human* values. Challengers express their belief in *human* values—values not tightly tied to a particular ethnic, cultural, or racial group. It may be necessary to identify differences before turning to similarities, but the aim is “transcendent values” or “higher values”—those that ultimately reach beyond a single ethnic, cultural, or racial identity toward a higher vision of what it means to be *human*.

To treat the Chinese instructors as an “underrepresented minority” misses the point.²³ The wisdom we find in much of Plato and Aristotle is precisely the kind of thought capable of transcending beyond particular ethnicities or cultures. And even if we were to devote time to understanding the Chinese culture in which Ms. Plato and Ms. Aristotle flourished, what's the harm? We might just learn something new about them, too!²⁴

I am reminded here of a story by Herodotus, the Greek historian of antiquity. Herodotus describes a scene in the court of Darius, the ancient Persian king. Darius was well traveled and knew that different cultures often followed different moral codes.

Darius...called into his presence certain Greeks who were at hand, and asked, 'What he should pay them to eat the bodies of their fathers when they died.' To which they answered, that there was no sum that would tempt them to do such a thing. He then sent for certain Indians, of the race called Callatians, men, who eat their fathers, and asked them, while the Greeks were standing by, and knew by the aid of an interpreter all that was said—'What he should give them to burn the bodies of their fathers, at their decease?' The Indians exclaimed aloud, and bade him forbear such language.²⁵

Callatians believed by eating their dead fathers the dead would “live on” vicariously, through them. Greeks regarded the funeral pyre as the most natural and fitting way to honor their dead. Despite these differences, a challenger might point to the “higher value” these two cultures shared: whether Callatian or Greek, both placed great value on *respect for their dead*. Had

there been freer interaction among these groups, perhaps it might have led to this point of shared common interest. Darius may not have felt that responsibility in his court, but in the modern classroom, the challenger does.

Education Is Political

*4. All education always has been political and always will necessarily be political, so it might as well be beneficially political.*²⁶

Searle says that the primary purpose of education in the humanities, for a challenger, is to bring about political transformation in our students. This however, is inaccurate. Challengers hope to bring about political *awareness* in students that may, in turn, *lead* to political transformation. Our responsibility as educators is to challenge students with new ideas. Sometimes this includes new *political* ideas and sometimes these political ideas are progressive.²⁷ Challenging students often means presenting them with thoughts or beliefs quite different from the social, political, ethical, and/or religious beliefs they have when they first enter university.

Opening students' minds to new ideas can be difficult. Within philosophy, instructors of ethics and social/political theory (among other courses) are often faced with a choice: when introducing students to moral disputes they can either include their own views or they can present the material in an impartial, neutral manner.²⁸ Those defending “disclosure” argue that providing students with a working model, that is, demonstrating how one actually goes about reasoning and defending certain issues, will engage and draw students into the discussion. Critics however, argue that “non-disclosure,” taking a balanced and impartial approach to the material, provides students with all the information necessary for them to make an informed decision on their own.

Advocates of disclosure insist that impartiality or “non-disclosure” should be avoided for a couple reasons:

First, non-disclosure fosters student relativism. To the student, one view appears just as good as any other.

Also, non-disclosure is inconsistent with our expectations of the students. If students are required to demonstrate reasoned positions, then, as instructors, we should not object to making our own positions public, since these positions were *also* arrived at through reasoned principles.²⁹

Those in favor of non-disclosure, on the other hand, insist that balanced impartiality is paramount. A method of critical examination requires that the instructor suspend personal judgment and provide (to the best of her ability) the evidence for opposing sides.³⁰ Non-disclosure, they argue, respects the intellectual autonomy of the student. Advocates of non-disclosure argue that disclosure must be avoided for the following reasons.

When a student is exposed to the instructor's view, she may accept it simply by virtue of the instructor's authority.

Relatedly, when an instructor's position has been aired, students will not give serious thought to the complexities involved in the issue/s and instead “write to” the instructor's point of view.

Searle and most traditionalists would, of course, side with advocates of non-disclosure. Disclosure is seen as an attempt by instructors to transform students to accepting their own “extreme left-wing” political views. Although this disclosure/non-disclosure debate is a complex issue, I think there is a place between these two extremes.

Before students can begin any significant philosophical investigation, moral or otherwise, they must be—at least minimally—familiar with the basic rules of argumentation. Logical tools are necessary for philosophical, indeed cognitive maturation. We provide instruction in the principles of reasoning so that students can, in turn, employ them in future discussions. But as we bear witness to students' maturation and sophistication in and of complex philosophical issues, our own impartiality becomes less and less important.

With persistent and continuous exercise, reason affords students the ability to engage in philosophical discussion. Decisions here will vary from course to course and instructor to instructor, but it seems to me that in upper-level undergraduate courses (and certainly in M.A. and Ph.D. programs), the philosophy instructor can and perhaps even *should* voice her own opinions and explain the reason/s how and why she arrived at this or that conclusion. In so doing, we illustrate to students that due to the gravity of these issues we, as instructors, have given serious deliberation to these matters and have arrived at *this* particular conclusion.

Instead of engaging in a fair and rational debate, Searle remains staunchly ideological. In a rather telling passage at the end of his article he says, “we should not be embarrassed by the fact that a

disproportionately large percentage of the major cultural achievements in our society have been made by White males.²³¹

Perhaps what we should be embarrassed—extremely embarrassed—about is the fact that John Searle, one of the most respected and eminent philosophers of our time, is either incapable or uninterested in representing this debate fairly. Searle's misrepresentation of the challengers' position is so blatant, so dismissive, one cannot be anything *but* embarrassed.

Notes

¹ Reprinted in *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn, 1997.

² His focus is primarily within the Humanities.

³ "Traditionalists and Their Challengers," John R. Searle, reprinted in *Classic & Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, pp. 536-546.

⁴ "It extends in philosophy from Socrates to Wittgenstein," says Searle, "or, if you like, from the pre-Socratics to Quine, in literature from the Greek poets and playwrights right up to, for example, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. The idea is that if you are going to be an educated person in the United States, you must have some familiarity with some of the chief works in this tradition because it defines our particular culture. You do not know who you are, in a sense, unless you have some familiarity with these works, because America is a product of this tradition, and the United States Constitution in particular is a product of a certain philosophical element in this tradition, the European Enlightenment. And then, too, we think that many works in this tradition, some of those by Shakespeare and Plato for example, are really so good that they are of *universal* human interest" (Searle, p. 537).

⁵ He says he is "going to do my best to try to state a widely held set of core assumptions made by the challengers" (Searle, p. 539).

⁶ Searle, p. 540.

⁷ Searle, p. 540.

⁸ Searle, p. 540.

⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, p. 3.

¹⁰ hooks, p. 4.

¹¹ Searle, "p. 540.

¹² Searle, "p. 543.

¹³ Allan Bloom, in his *The Closing of the American Mind*, makes a similar charge against

challengers. "The true believer is the real danger. The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all," p. 26.

¹⁴ See Richard Rorty's "Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching," p. 524. Reprinted in *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn, 1997.

¹⁵ My thanks to Martin Benjamin for pointing this out to me.

¹⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict*, p. 144.

¹⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 19.

¹⁹ Searle, p. 540, [my emphasis].

²⁰ It may of course be important to identify the differences before turning to the similarity that binds us together.

²¹ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, p. 292. Selections reprinted in *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Education*, ed. by Steven M. Cahn, 1997.

²² Searle, p. 541.

²³ Searle also says challengers assume that "since the canon consists of mostly White European males, the authors must have been selected *because* they are White European males" (Searle, p. 541). Conveniently overlooked however is the fact that oppression and discrimination have barred a significant number of groups entry into the canon. Those awarded access were mostly White European males. Searle should stop to consider why women were sometimes forced to use male pseudonyms or even went anonymous (e.g., George Eliot and, for a time, Mary Shelly, respectively).

²⁴ Let's consider this kind of example in the opposite direction: a wealthy, professional English writer is, for many years, mistaken for a poor English dilettante. Perhaps we learn of this mistake. Should we now read these works with an eye for English flair? For many years, there has been suspicion that the works of William Shakespeare were actually penned by someone else, a Tudor politician descended from King Edward III. Brenda James and William Rubinstein have proposed that the real Shakespeare was Sir Henry Neville, an English courtier and diplomat. If true, should we discard the "higher values" we've taken from the bard

and insist further that the only individuals capable of teaching "Shakespeare" are English diplomats?

²⁵ Herodotus, *History*, pp. iii, 38.

²⁶ Searle, pp. 541-542.

²⁷ Searle contemptuously refers to these ideas as "extreme left-wing" politics (Searle, p. 543). This is but another problem with Searle's representation of challenger assumptions. He intentionally makes appeals to emotion by saying things like "radical politics," "extreme left-wing," and "left-wing radicalism." And he honestly thinks he is being "even-handed"? This sort of language only serves to evoke *negative emotions* in the reader; it does nothing to substantiate his philosophical claim.

²⁸ This debate is long and varied. For further reading on this topic see, Baumgarten, Elias, "The Ethical and Social Responsibilities of Philosophy Teachers," *Metaphilosophy* 11:2, (1980) pp. 182-91. Bomstad, Linda, "Advocating Procedural Neutrality," *Teaching Philosophy* 18:3, (1995) pp. 197-210. Brod, Harry, "Philosophy Teaching as Intellectual Affirmative Action," *Teaching Philosophy* 9:1, (1986) pp. 5-13. Goldman, Michael, "On Moral Relativism, Advocacy, and Teaching Normative Ethics," *Teaching Philosophy* 4:1, (1981) pp. 1-10. Marks, Joel, "Teaching Philosophy, Being a Philosopher," *Teaching Philosophy* 16:2, pp. 99-104. Martin, Mike, "Advocating Values: Professionalism in Teaching Ethics," *Teaching Philosophy* (1997) pp. 19-34.

²⁹ The very same principles we are encouraging in these students.

³⁰ Of course *global* neutrality, i.e., neutrality in and of *everything* in the course is impossible to attain as we certainly bring some degree of bias in choosing a text, in our selection of readings, allocation of time on particular issues, etc. Yet, despite its elusiveness, global neutrality should not simply be discarded, nor does it mean advocacy therefore must be embraced.

³¹ Searle, p. 545.