

Not as Truth, but as Dialogue

Instead of asking, "Are there truths out there that we shall never discover?" we would ask, "Are there ways of talking and acting that we have not yet explored?" Instead of asking whether the intrinsic nature of reality is yet in sight..., we should ask whether each of the various descriptions of reality employed in our various cultural activities is the best we can imagine—the best means to the ends served by those activities.¹

In the seven months since I assumed the Editorship of *Confluence*, and with tremendous support from the AGLSP Board, much has been accomplished for the journal: we have refined our editorial review process and established a pool of Reviewers-at Large to help support the Editorial Board, we have launched a wholly redesigned and repurposed website, and with this issue we have returned to publishing in print to augment our ongoing (and expanding!) online publishing presence.

These are all fine accomplishments, and I am certain that this is only the beginning of what *Confluence* will become over the months and years to come. Yet these are but functional steps, necessary to position *Confluence* for the real work that must be done. All of these changes—streamlining our submission and review protocols, developing more efficient and more accessible methods of publication, and cultivating a larger and more diverse body of readers, contributors, and sponsoring institutions—will ultimately enable *Confluence* to realize its potential, its *mission*, as an organ of dialogue in the spirit of what 'Liberal Studies' means. This is no small challenge, and perhaps

¹ Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6.

a significant question is implied in the previous statement: what, one may ask, does 'Liberal Studies' *mean*?

Liberal Studies has, at various times and in varying places, been described as an education in 'the classics,' as learning for the sake of learning, as an interdisciplinary exploration and synthesis of the seemingly disparate methods, topics, and ideas comprised by the 'Humanities' aggregate. Liberal Studies has also been championed for its tendency to cultivate the habits and skills needed to think deeply and critically and to communicate with precision and eloquence. I hope that the merit in each of these values is obvious; further, I hope that the presence of each in any formal Liberal Studies program is both equally obvious and effective. Still..., is there more to the 'Liberal Studies' story?

There is a value in Liberal Studies education that, though uniquely dependent on the skills and values noted above, goes well beyond them. Although a primary purpose of higher education in general, and Liberal Studies in particular, is to provide a sound foundation on which one can begin to identify oneself and one's world, it must equally provide the tools with which to question, to discuss, and to recognize and cultivate new manners of relating. Liberal Studies seeks to liberate by delivering an intellectual experience that respects a multitude of traditions and perspectives. This *liberation* is of immense importance; the profound openness that is necessary to truly learn can only be discovered through the clearing of preconceptions, presumptions, and prejudices. Yet with this liberation comes uncertainty and fear; as Søren Kierkegaard contended, anxiety is the "dizziness of freedom." When we are compelled to question our own preconceived notions of what constitutes art, or personhood, or truth, we are equally forced to acknowledge that perhaps such things are not definitively knowable, which in turn liberates us from the dogmatic tendencies that preclude us from continuing to question the things that we think we know as well as being capable of living with the questions that we just can't seem to answer. Certainly Socrates meant something much like this when he contended that wisdom "begins in wonder." What Liberal Studies can gift to us is the understanding that you don't always get the full answer with your first attempt to engage any particular question (and sometimes you actually wind up with a rather poor answer), but that you can very often continue to grapple with the question toward more satisfying results; and in any case, there are some questions that are just worth living with until the end, because the constant engagement with these questions will continue to define you and your place in the world.

To gain the capacity for openness and the ability to question is an immense benefit, individually and collectively; however, it would seem to come at a great price, if they can only be attained by letting go of a particular insistence on finding, and ultimately possessing, *Truth*. But is this really a loss? The late American pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty insightfully posited that philosophical inquiry should be less concerned with *Truth* as such and more concerned with its capacity to *serve human society*. Rorty proposed a turn away from Truth and instead toward solidarity, suggesting that individuals can be united as a society in the shared recognition of the contingency of language and of belief and by the simultaneous recognition of the shared potential for suffering. Rorty concludes that the goal for philosophy and society, and the ideal by which belief and behavior may be directed, lies in this conception of solidarity, constituted as “the ability to see more and more traditional differences...as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of ‘us.’”² It is thus through solidarity that we see ourselves in the other, and we recognize in the other’s suffering the potential for our own suffering. As Emmanuel Levinas concluded, “In the relation to the other, the other appears to me as one to whom I owe something, toward whom I have a responsibility.”³ This is what a ‘liberal’ education can contribute to individuals and to society: liberal education ought to compel one to more fully examine the world and one’s place in it; it allows one to begin to see from the perspective of others and to better understand the world as they see it; and it offers the opportunity and the means by which a deeper understanding of oneself and of others can be achieved and the capacity for relation between the two realized.

This brings us back to the original point, that the mission of *Confluence* is to become an organ of dialogue in the spirit of what ‘Liberal Studies’ means. To this end, and from this moment, *Confluence* will stand as a forum for constructive dialogue, in the spirit of the kind of intellectual openness that both defines and allows for a ‘liberal’ education. There will be no Truth in these pages; rather, here you will find opening statements, questions, and invitations to think, to question, and to *participate*. At times, these questions will center around works of art or fiction, historic events,

² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, UK; Cambridge University Press, 1989), 192.

³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (trans Michael B. Smith; New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 101.

or philosophical/religious notions past and present. At other times, these questions will urgently seek to address circumstances of injustice, issues of equality, and conceptions of what it means to be a human being in the world, past and present. Yet underlying and uniting all of these discussions ought to be the development of a community committed to understanding human values and improving the human condition. This is precisely what earnest, empathetic, and honest dialogue can allow; it is my hope that this is precisely what *Confluence* will become, and become known *for*. In this manner *Confluence* will better demonstrate not only that “everything is connected to everything else,” but also that there is an essential relatedness inherent in this connection that must be engaged and explored.

* * * * *

Both the need for and the ability to relate is an inherent, fundamental quality of human being; the human capacity to realize and engage in meaningful relation stands as the structural character of reality and of existential meaning.⁴ As suggested above, one of the fundamental purposes of a ‘liberal education’ is to provide a foundation from which one can begin to identify oneself and one’s world, while also encouraging a particular manner of questioning; these are likewise the tools necessary to sustain the dialogue that is necessary to cultivate new manners of relating. At the heart of a liberal education should be an acute recognition of, and respect for, the profound diversity of human character and human experience, which should in turn motivate and direct the promotion of justice. If as a society we are unable to learn how to think more critically, to engage and give weight to other points of view, and ultimately to expand our own boundaries to begin to overlap those of others, then there is no hope for an open, equal, and free society. It is my supreme hope that *Confluence* will contribute in meaningful ways to the growing dialogue in service of our readers and contributors, the community of Liberal Studies programs, and the perpetual preservation of the values that define what it means to be a human being in the world.

Thank you for reading, for thinking, and for taking up the dialogue. Contact me any time: sb1017@comcast.net or sburr@loyola.edu.

⁴ Steven A. Burr, *Finite Transcendence: Existential Exile and the Myth of Home* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).