

The Suicide of Liberal Education: Deconstruction in Academia

By Bruce L. Edwards

Whatever is not eternal is eternally out of date.

– C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

The world as we know it is not the world as it once was. The world as we see it and experience it is not the world as it was designed and ordained at its origin.

These are the secret facts that inform our every attempt to make sense of the cosmos and of our place in it. These are the premises that animate every investigation into what it means to be human, every inquiry into the true nature of freedom, justice, and happiness. These are the stubborn rumors of a Lost Eden that no civilization has been able entirely to dismiss or disavow in all the millennia that mankind has existed on earth. These, in particular, are the metaphysical foundations of what we have come to call Western civilization.

What is man that God – or we – are mindful of him? So asks the Psalmist, not only for himself, or for Hebrew civilization, but for all of us.¹ We are not gods, but creatures; as finite and fallible beings, we nevertheless yearn for the truth. How does one live in a fallen or manifestly incomplete world? Is the answer in the stars or in ourselves – or to be found elsewhere? What can “knowledge” of the world we inhabit possibly entail? What part does language play in negotiating that world, of discovering and understanding it, in expressing the self and its knowledge to other selves? How is language to be ethically employed in coming to terms with the finiteness of human intellect and the likelihood of distorting or misconstruing what is because of the limited perspectives and experiences one brings to the act of knowing?

Western civilization, I submit, offers a record of insightful and compelling responses to these questions – answers based on its pattern of rigorous self-scrutiny in regard to these issues and to others that impinge on our sense of what counts as the real and the true.

¹ Psalm 8:4

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He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on July 24, 1990.

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The term *civilization* is here perhaps ambiguous; while it can be defined rather technically in terms of politics, art, religion, and so on, I would like to use it here rather loosely in terms of a “shared sense of peoplehood,” focusing on the epistemology that undergirds a civilization’s peculiar worldview, that is, how knowledge is defined, acquired, tested, accumulated, and disseminated over time. A civilization’s epistemology – how it knows what it knows, how it validates knowledge claims – is rarely explicit to its members, except of course to those whose business or interest it is to articulate, compare, and evaluate epistemologies *across* civilizations. Inevitably – and I want to underscore this for future reference – this epistemology entails, and in some ways is identical to, a view of how language works in human culture, how speech and text communicate the world inside the individual consciousness to the world outside of it.

An epistemology operates tacitly, beneath the sturdy surface of everyday existence, of conscious life; it is the lens through which one sees and interprets the world. When epistemology becomes more and more an object of concern and debate among the general populace, that is, when the lens through which one is viewing becomes as much a focal point as what one is looking at, a crisis ensues and the civilization is endangered. For a civilization can endure and assimilate all manner of alien ideology as long as its component parts can in some sense be translated and subsumed into that civilization’s existing traditions and experiences, and thus interpreted as a refinement or corrective of the past.

However, when the invading concepts and behaviors so challenge the basic premises of how the civilization even reasons about itself, when the common folk themselves, and not just the intelligentsia, begin to question the foundations of their daily lives, that civilization is thus subject to, and perhaps becomes reconciled to, its dissolution.

Historically, Western epistemology may be seen to rest on a basic stance toward humanity and to language and communication that has recently been defamed by anti-Western academics under the epithet, “logocentrism.”² Simply put, logocentrism is the common sense belief that man is a sentient being with a will, an intellect, and a soul – not an empty, colorless shell to be filled in by the landscape in which he is situated – a “one” whose personal rationality enables him to know himself, and to know the world at large, through the use of language. Logocentrism assumes that language equips man adequately for confronting, understanding, and communicating the world he perceives outside of himself. Logocentrism aligns itself with the conviction that human language can bear faithful reference to a world outside the mind of the language user.

The practical import of Western logocentrism is this: each of us inhabits an intelligible universe of discourse. When I think “aloud” about the world with myself as the audience, or when I speak or write to an “outside audience,” I do so in a lexicon and a syntax that exists within a general social milieu of shared experience. Therein we may together “make meaning,” we can regard our exchange as a set of meaningful utterances about the world at large and not merely the divulging of worlds that exist perhaps only in our own heads. In the West, human rationality is conceived such that when there are no physiological

2 For example, Vincent Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 39-54.

dysfunctions (aphasia, amnesia, etc.) or debilitating motives (I wish to deceive or be deceived), and there is an overall adequate context for communication (I am not addressing three-year-olds on the subject of Sartre's existentialism), the intentions and overall purposes of a speaker or writer can be made tolerably clear – and communication can occur.

More importantly, errors of perception and reason may be corrected by continuing to observe, to test, to articulate the knowledge claims that accumulate in a given community. Another way of saying this is that the West has always regarded language as both heuristic and epistemic, that is, capable on the one hand of discovering and rendering the world as it is, and on the other hand, capable of contributing to it by creating knowledge, that is, fictions – poetry, literature, art – that are analogous to or mimetic of reality but distinct from it.

The West and Liberal Education. I belabor these points because, though they were once the default premises with which the university went about its business, they are no longer. Liberal education is in its death throes. By “liberal education” I intend what Russell Kirk means when he refers to liberal education as “an ordering and integrating of knowledge for the benefit of the free person.”³ It is “liberal” education not in the sense of promoting a contemporary liberal’s political agenda but “liberal” in the older, classical sense, that denotes the purpose of education as preparing the honest inquirer for the pursuit of Truth, and not merely some vocational goal, an education that places him in fellowship with all truth-seekers from all ages and cultures.

It is this kind of learning, as Allan Bloom elucidated it in his *Closing of the American Mind*, that helps “students to pose this question [What is man?] to themselves, to become aware that the answer is neither obvious nor simply unavailable, and that there is no serious life in which this question is not a continuous concern. . . . The liberally educated person is one who is able to resist the easy and preferred answers, not because he is obstinate but because he knows others worthy of consideration.”⁴ “Liberal” education so understood can promise liberation because it believes in the possibility of objective knowledge, knowledge that frees us from illusion and wishful thinking, approximate and finite as it may be, knowledge publicly available and publicly corroborable to any who would seek it. At the same time, it also affirms that the outlines of the knowledge most worth having, that which a person needs to live a free, happy, peaceful, and fruitful life, has already been identified by his forebears and need not be sought from scratch in every generation.

Liberal education can be defined not so much, then, as a set of core texts – though it is obvious some texts will be more valuable than others in seeking the truth – but as a set of core presuppositions about what can, could, and should be known about the cosmos and about mankind’s place in it. The student is charged not with constructing an epistemology but inhabiting one; not with creating but receiving knowledge; not with abandoning the

3 Russell Kirk, *The Wise Men Know What Wicked Things are Written on the Sky* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1987), 79.

4 *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 21.

past, but using it as a compass to chart the present and the future. There is a “thereness” to the West, a givenness that provides stability and historical context to our spiritual and intellectual odyssey.

The goals of liberal education, as can be inferred by my delineation of it here, until recently were nearly indistinguishable from the generational task of articulating and defending Western civilization, what used to be called the transmittal of our common heritage. This, I would argue, should be cause for neither embarrassment nor shame, for the West, for all its individual crimes and horrors, mistakes and missteps, has bequeathed humankind with its most fruitful, secure epistemology for negotiating the world and the cosmos, for coming to understand what it means to be human and to mature as a responsible human being.

To speak of the West in this way is, of course, to recall what Russell Kirk has identified as “the tale of five cities” – Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, London, and Philadelphia – the tale of philosophical, religious, and aesthetic insights into the nature of man and community, the building of family and society around sound ideas and policies, the tale of a remarkably multiperspectived, multiethnic worldview that is both breathtakingly expansive and prohibitively inclusive – and, because of its respect for truth tested and tried, appreciably traditionalist and orderly.

Deconstructing Deconstruction. By contrast is a view of the West, which is to say, of man, and of language, that is dedicated to undermining and displacing the epistemology of realism that Western, liberal education had upheld and promoted for five hundred years. Deconstruction is the umbrella term by which I will refer to this multifaceted adversary of the Western tradition. Deconstruction, succinctly put, is liberal education’s suicide note.

Deconstruction as such is an amorphous, radically elusive concept and practice, one that defies coherent summary or easy explication. It is a term that is “talk-aboutable” under many rubrics: as philosophy, as literary theory or criticism, as sociology, psychology, historiography, or any number of other, various disciplinary matrices. And yet its project is clear. Among deconstructors one will find radical feminists, Marxists, Freudians, and all manner of disaffected and disenfranchised dissenters – all refugees from the alleged imperialism of the patriarchal Western tradition. Deconstruction now is as much a mood as a mode of thought. It is the perfect ethos for the modern academy whose hatred of tradition and whose denial of diachronic truth is principled and explicit. In the final analysis it is the spirit not the letter of deconstruction that kills.

Deconstruction is the embodiment of a ghostly presence that has haunted the academy since the early sixties and the Free Speech Movement. It is the final revenge of aging activists and radicals who could not achieve their social program through the political process and have taken refuge on campus within the sinecures of those disciplines that have few objective standards for evaluating their work or teaching – typically the humanities and social sciences. It is they whom Roger Kimball calls the “tenured radicals” who are best served by relativizing curricula and dismantling the canon of Western works for it provides the ground cover they need for the intellectual looting of

students' minds.⁵ They have succeeded in transforming the campus into a reeducation camp for training students for their prescribed role as exiles in their own culture: schools for autism that drive young minds deeper into subjectivity and solipsistic, "private morals." Eric Voegelin describes this mindset well as "gnosticism":

In the Gnostic dream world. . . nonrecognition of reality is the first principle. As a consequence, types of action which in the real world would be considered as morally insane because of the real effect which they have will be considered moral in the dream world because they intended an entirely different effect. The gap between intended and real effect will be imputed not to the Gnostic immorality of ignoring the structure of reality but to the immorality of some other person or society that does not behave as it should behave according to the dream conception of cause and effect.⁶

My concern here is less with an exposition of deconstruction than a demonstration of its effects, with what it does rather than what it is. For deconstruction, ultimately, is not some new thing under the sun, but a restatement or repackaging of some of the oldest skepticisms ever entertained by man – except expressed less cogently and charmingly than those propounded by Zeno, Protagoras, or Gorgias in the ancient world. It will be my claim that to the extent that the academy embraces the presuppositions of deconstruction, liberal education is effectively eradicated.⁷ But, more importantly, to the extent that our culture at large embraces the political ramifications of deconstruction, our free society is also imperiled.

Entering the Labyrinth. How is such an apocalyptic vision underwritten by the deconstructionist challenge? In one deceptively simple "insight" conveyed in this phrase: "there is no outside of the text." There are no landmarks, there are no reference points outside a text with which to fix meaning or arbitrate between truth and error, between faithful and perverse interpretation; as a result, every text is radically ambiguous and beyond final, determinate interpretation. Enter with me into the labyrinth of contemporary critical theory for a few minutes for a Cliff's Notes version of the source and consequences of this tenet of deconstructionism.

Deconstruction begins not with a world that is already "there," independent and knowable, but one that must be "constructed," and constructed through human language.

5 Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

6 Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), 169-70.

7 The following books and articles are helpful expositions and critiques of deconstructionist philosophy and literary theory: George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Gregory B. Smith, "Cacophony or Silence: Jacques Derrida's Deconstructionism," *The Political Science Reviewer* (Vol. XVIII, Fall, 1988), 127-62; Joel Schwartz, "Antihumanism in the Humanities," *The Public Interest* (Spring 1990, No. 99), 29-44; and the special issue devoted to conservative and libertarian critiques of deconstruction published by *Critical Review* (Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter, 1989).

The world is a flux on which order is imposed. That “the thing in itself” can never be known echoes through the post-Enlightenment world. Kant thought it was the mind’s innate categories that provided order; Marx, economic class; Nietzsche, the will to power. Jacques Derrida, godfather of deconstructionist philosophy and practice, and his besmitten entourage of Anglo-American literary critics, aver that it is the language system itself that provides an illusory order.⁸ This order comes in the form of a coercive or dominant ideology, frequently Western metaphysics, manifested in its “logocentrism” and its vaunted notions of objectivity and the uniqueness of human personhood.

Deconstructionists enthusiastically embrace Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s odd pronouncement that hearers discern sounds not by recognizing any positive, unique features that a particular sound possesses but by distinguishing *the differences between sounds*. The unique or substantial “B-ness” of the consonant “B” is an illusion; one “knows” B as B because it is not “P” or “T,” and thus not because there are discernible features that intrinsically comprise the sound or semantic value of B. Language is a system of endless deferrals, according to Saussure, since each sound or sign continually points away from itself as a source of intrinsic meaning to the play of differences within language.

Deconstructionists conclude that, therefore, there is no way language ever refers “outside” itself since Saussure’s insight implies an infinite regression of sounds and references that never quite point to anything that actually exists in itself in the world at large. Consequently, language, and the texts constructed with it, are terminally open, unfixed, bereft of a “center” or originary core of meaning deposited by an “intentioned” author. Meaning thus becomes regarded as a product of *differentiation*, not of *identification*. That is to say, the intention to “mean” something is defined as an attempt to articulate a compendium of predicates that a subject is not. Nothing is what it “is” – only what it is not. This relocates “meaning,” which is no longer found in the sounds of the speaker or the words intended by a writer on the page, in the “play” of the immediate situational context of speaker and audience.

Since one can only talk about the world in language and one cannot get “outside” of language to determine its part in “coloring” or “shaping” that elusively objective world we wish to name, “understanding” is a process of cultural negotiation and interaction; or, to use the current jargon, reality is unavoidably a construction of ideology in which meaning is imposed from without. The concept of an “objective” reality is therefore both misleading and unhelpful. The task of the deconstructor is to demonstrate that this is the case – to deconstruct existing worldviews, institutions, notions of the nature of man, politics, literature, etc., as mere “language about itself,” language that possesses no more authority to order reality than the alternatives proposed by those oppressed by the dominant version of “reality.” All thought is levelled and politicized and thus revealed as a product of ideology.

⁸ A representative list of Derrida’s major works would include the following: *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973); *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); *Positions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); and *Glas* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

When reality is understood as merely a social construct and not as an external, public landscape where minds may meet and true statements about the world can be made, the means by which truth can be discovered, uttered, or maintained is wrested out of the hands of individuals. The individual must surrender unconditionally any claim to knowing transcendent truth, or, indeed, any truth beyond a peculiar private sort, for he is a captive of not only of his own signifying system, but also his ideologically-induced biases. Man as knower, speaker, writer is trapped within "the prison house of language."

Authorial intention is one of the first casualties of this deconstructive move and becomes of little importance in interpreting or responding to a text. The "self" normally construed as an individual initiator of discourse is itself viewed as a construct of the community in which the text is constructed. In other words, in a world made out of words, human lives themselves are "texts" written within a community in which no one speaker or writer within it can arbitrate meaning with supreme authority or power. What we regard as "ourselves" is itself a product of the "texts" others have "written" in and through us.

In this view, the physical text and the author are permitted to fade from focus as objects of inquiry; readers then are called upon instead to "read between the lines," to attend not to what the author says in his text but to the historical forces operating in the culture at a particular moment through him. The human self is, in fact, an illusion, a temporary "trace," a zero whose apparent identity is just the product of warring "differences" that temporarily given him shape. Like the phoneme "B" when "P" and "T" are not around, the "one" who seems to speak or script just disappears. There is no "transcendental signified," or deity, to rescue him, neither is there an innate human nature to give credence to his claims of personhood or self-identity.

Preemptive Censorship. The implications for canon and curricula can now be drawn out. As deconstructionist ideology increasingly governs the processes of scholarship – and tenure – in ways both subtle and unsubtle on campus, it achieves a preemptive censorship of what can and should be taught, studied, and published by an untenured, junior professoriate. In modern humanities and social sciences scholarship particularly, one learns to research not in pursuit of objective knowledge, but in the service of an already established ideological platform. Conclusions are foregone. In the search for knowledge, as now-approved, right-thinking scholarship would tell us, one may never *arrive at*; one must always *depart from*.⁹

Such sentiments, dubious or arguable as they may seem, are being systematically encoded into the systems of reward and punishment in the modern academy. The hiring and tenuring of faculty of who may dissent from this new orthodoxy is problematical and increasingly improbable. The ideal of academic freedom, however it operated in the past, is rapidly being redefined as the right to think-like-we-do. And there are decidedly more Thought Police on the left than on the right in the modern academy. Consider this telling set of observations from a rising academic star, one to whom the *New York Times*

9 In addition to Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals*, the two following books document the political fallout of deconstruction both for higher education and public policy: Charles Sykes, *Profscam* (Washington: Regnery, 1988); James Atlas, *Book Wars* (Memphis: Whittle Direct, 1990).

Magazine has devoted a cover story (April, 1, 1990), a highly coveted “free agent” in the professional literary leagues of the academy, and a former MacArthur Foundation award winner. The writer is black scholar, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who specializes in ethnic literatures, here describing the ethos of the new establishment in literary studies:

The Cultural Left [consists of] that uneasy, shifting set of alliances formed by feminist critics, critics of so-called “minority” discourse, and Marxist and poststructuralist critics generally. . . . Bennett and Bloom have come to play for us the roles that George Wallace and Orville Faubus played for the civil rights movement, or that Nixon and Kissinger played for us during Vietnam – the “feel good” targets, who, despite our internal differences, we loved to hate. Of course, when Bennett writes in *To Reclaim a Legacy* that “the core of the American college curriculum – its heart and soul – should be the civilization of the West,” and accounts for this so-called civilizing process in terms of the mastery of Matthew Arnold’s “the best that has been thought and written,” by white males for white males about white males during the past three thousand years, we have little choice but to identify his position as inimical to our best interest and antithetical to the larger socioeconomic changes in the academy for which so many of us have been fighting since the civil rights movement and the protests against the civil war. . . . [Therefore], I believe that we, as a body [Modern Language Association], must begin to take public stands on the social and political issues that plague our society, our campuses, and our profession. Specifically, I believe that we must take public stands on sexism and racism and must sponsor resolutions on specific issues related to affirmative action at all levels on our college campuses.¹⁰

Gates’ scholarship and predispositions exemplify the new deconstructionist ethos: all texts are already embedded in – here come the usual suspects – a sexist, racist, classist, heterosexist language and literary tradition that privileges white European males, and thus penalizes and ostracizes nonwhites, nonWesterners, women, homosexuals, etc., etc. “Oppressionist” literary study thus legitimates the ravaging or deconstructing of the traditional canon.

The contemporary campus must now be regarded not as an agency governed by a desire to discover and to articulate truth, but as a laboratory for cultural engineering, for devising and contriving strategies for thought control. It is here that gender and race are “deconstructed” and shown to be a plot of the patriarchal fascists who control the canon. It is here that the privilege of purposive behavior, of intent and motive, residing in words under the control of a human individual is destroyed. Søren Kierkegaard, writing one hundred and fifty years ago of the ascendancy in European intellectual circles of Hegel’s dialectical historicism and its devaluing of the individual, observed that

10 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “On the Rhetoric of Racism in the Profession,” *Literature, Language, and Politics*. Ed. Betty Jean Craige (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) 21, 23. In the same volume, Ellen Messer-Davidow explicitly condemns what she predicts is the New Right’s eventual takeover attempt of higher education, “The Right Moves: Conservativism and Higher Education,” 54–83.

A passionate tumultuous age will overthrow everything, pull everything down; but a revolutionary age, that is at the same time reflective and passionless, transforms that expression of strength into a feat of dialectics: it leaves everything standing but cunningly empties it of significance. Instead of culminating in a rebellion it reduces the inward reality of all relationships to a reflective tension which leaves everything standing but makes the whole of life ambiguous: so that everything continues to exist factually whilst by a dialectical deceit, *privatissime*, it supplies a secret interpretation that it does not exist.¹¹

Deconstruction's rather silent revolution on campus, like that of Hegel's anti-humanistic dialectics in the nineteenth century, also "leaves everything standing, but empties it of significance."

Off-Campus Invasion. Were deconstructionist ideology truly confined to campus, we would all lament the reductionist pedagogy it represents, we would decry the limited access it provides to superior authors and texts, we would complain of the wastefulness of publicly supporting doctrinaire faculty who profess only the cant and jargon of skeptical discourse – but then, for all our dismay, we could all retreat to the surer foundations of the real world and pity the poor students so disadvantaged. But deconstruction has not been quarantined but has mutated off campus in the form of what Richard John Neuhaus has called an ongoing program of "racialist and sexualist politics," legitimating the radical egalitarianism evident in current public policy battles.

If man has no intrinsic nature, if God has not ordained any destiny for human beings, then we may make of man and society what we wish. It is not the professional deconstructors on campus, writing revisionist histories and displacing William Shakespeare with Kate Millett who concern me. It is the amateur deconstructionists who superintend school systems, who serve as aldermen in city councils, who hear cases as appeals court judges, who lobby for previously unknown, unenumerated, and unenumerable "fundamental rights" without an attending concern for duty and responsibility.

Robert Bork's recent book, *The Tempting of America*, documents the degree to which "originalists," or judges who interpret the law and the constitution in light of the intentions of the Framers, are held up to ridicule by contemporary law school professors who see their task not as interpreters, but as legislators. Bork carefully traces how the mania for theory characteristic of the humanities under the sway of deconstructionism has now infested American law schools.¹² Laurence Tribe is singled out by Bork as an exemplar of

11 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 42-43

12 Bork observes that "To understand the new constitutions being built in the law schools, it is necessary to be a philosopher, at least an amateur one. If the literature were to be taken seriously, it would be necessary for lawyers and judges to study the vast outpouring of words that comes from the law professors and to choose among their methodologies. More than that, however, since many of the professors regard themselves as philosophers, it would be necessary to read widely in moral philosophy, hermeneutics, deconstructionism, Marxism, and who-knows-what-will-come-next. The reader is supposed to be familiar with utilitarianism, contractarianism, Mill, Derrida, Habermas, positivism, formalism, Rawls, Nozick, and the literature of radical feminism. It turns out, though

the deconstructionist contempt for authorial intention, for historical precedent, and for the uniqueness of human personhood. Tribe, faculty member at Harvard Law School, and one of the prime architects of the proto-deconstructionist Critical Legal Studies movement, equates making a woman carry her child to term, in his words, “an involuntary servitude,” with the subjugation experienced by slaves in ante-bellum America. In his new book, *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes*, Tribe establishes himself as a master of deconstructionist jurisprudence who clearly has little sense of what an “absolute” might look like or how it may operate in history to undergird the practice of law in a democratic society.¹³

The spread of deconstruction’s influence in public polity is also seen in the rise of what Russell Nieli has called “ethnic tribalism.”¹⁴ Ethnic tribalism strategically rejects the “personalist ethic” characteristic of Judeo-Christian faith and Jeffersonian democracy within which each individual is seen as a unique creature of God who, bearing His image, inhabits a society of persons created equal and endowed with inalienable rights. In its place of this ethic, which was, as Nieli points out, the basis of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s campaign for civil rights, the ethnic tribalist offers a progressive and excessive extrapolation of the individual from himself as a unique person. Under ethnic tribalism personal identity is reallocated to an abstract class, race, or tribe wherein personhood is merged into the vagaries of a stereotyped, collectivist group-identity. All of life becomes one grand class-action suit against Western culture on behalf of the oppressed.

The marshalling of political forces behind affirmative action or racially-based hiring and promotion procedures reinforces the notion that no individual as such exists, that is there is no universal personhood requisite to a man or woman except that which can be buttressed with the statistical credentials of the victimized “minority” or the assignment of the individual to some demographically-derived ethno-gender category. The fruit of this dissociation of individual uniqueness, of character and merit, from the meaning of personhood is an antinomianism that dismisses the concept of equality before the law all the while flaunting it in the pursuit of power.

Deconstructionist reasoning may now condescend to justify all manner of anti-social behavior, from the drug abuse or “serial polygamy” of prominent politicians to the founding of citizen militias to oppose “power structures.” Consider this testimony from controversial Milwaukee alderman, Mike McGee, quoted by a *Washington Post* reporter:

My moral code is that I don’t feel there are any laws that the United States has made that I’m bound to respect because I consider myself to be at a state of war. . . . I consider the white structure to be the enemy. I live by a set of codes that are accepted and condoned by my community. I call

previously it had never been suspected, that in order to understand the American Constitution ratified in 1787, one must study not John Locke or even James Madison, but a modern German Marxist.” *The Tempting of America* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 134.

13 New York: Norton, 1990.

14 Russell Nieli, “Ethnic Tribalism and the Revolt Against Human Personhood: What’s Wrong with Affirmative Action?” *This World* (Fall, 1987), 59-78.

them black laws. There are white laws, and there are black laws. The black code is set by black society and has standards passed down to me through generations that have been able to make it despite all the oppression. In other words, it's a survival code.¹⁵

McGee's street-wise deconstructionism effectively repeals the 14th amendment and triumphantly restores color and race consciousness to public policy making.

Social agencies and programs that promote "diversity" often mask what is really a prohibitive homogeneity that leaves no room for dissent from the existing orthodoxy or for a recognition of the unique attributes of the individuals who find themselves pigeonholed with a particular grouping. In this system there can be no black conservatives, no pro-life feminists, no "English-as-the-primary-language" Hispanics who are not somehow traitors to their race or gender. Contrary to Dr. King's dream, increasingly it is the content of their entitlements, and not the content of their character, by which this generation is asking to be judged.

Multiculturalism and Western Particularism. As racial and gender politics continue to foment, deconstructionist principles are rapidly becoming a part of the fabric of debate even in elementary and secondary education. Diane Ravitch's recent *American Scholar* article, "Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures," offers a much-needed critique of the multiculturalist movement in public education.¹⁶ At the same time it also illustrates some of the reasons liberal education is endangered even by its advocates, who sometimes unwittingly accept the premises of their adversaries.

In her article Ravitch castigates the "filiopietists" whose "brand of history" identifies everyone as "either a descendant of victims or oppressors."¹⁷ Under the banner of "multiculturalism," as she documents, public elementary and secondary schools are increasingly politicized and forced to respond to the narrow epistemological interests of activist groups, groups she labels "Europhobic." In their wake, some school systems have begun to inaugurate explicitly ethnocentric curricula to undergird inner-city students' self-esteem and have initiated reforms like "ethno-mathematics" to liberate this seemingly innocent science of the taint of "Eurocentrism." Her suggested solution to this state of affairs is to distinguish between "pluralistic multiculturalism" and "particularist multiculturalism."

The former, she argues, recognizes the multi-ethnic character of American culture

that has been influenced over time by immigrants, American Indians, Africans (slave and free) and by their descendants. American music, art, literature, language, food, clothing, sports, holidays, and customs all show

15 *Washington Post*, 18 July 1990, p. A11.

16 Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism: E Pluribus Plures," *American Scholar* (Vol. 59, No. 3; Summer, 1990), 337-54.

17 *Ibid.*, 341-42.

the effects of commingling of diverse cultures in one nation. Paradoxical though it may seem, the United States has a common culture that is multicultural.¹⁸

Against this pluralism she places the more troubling "particularism," which goes beyond recognizing the many contributions various ethnic groups have made to American culture and the notion of a shared or sharable heritage, and advocates in its place an ethno-gender specific epistemology for creating curricula and for determining "whose" history should be taught. Vigorously opposing this stance as pernicious, Ravitch argues that it

throws into question the very idea of American public education. Public schools exist to teach children the general skills and knowledge that they need to succeed in American society, and the specific skills and knowledge that they need in order to function as American citizens.¹⁹

With this it is difficult to disagree, as Ravitch convincingly argues, much as E. D. Hirsch recently has, that American social justice and productivity require more attention to equipping all American students with the same basic skills, skills which have no ethnic or gender origin or bias. However, Ravitch follows this defense of rigorous and equal public education with a gratuitous attack on the role and the constitution of the private school in America, implying, however obliquely, that private schools contribute to the Balkanization of American education:

For generations those groups that wanted to inculcate their religion or their ethnic heritage have instituted private schools – after school, on weekends or on a full-time basis. There, children learn with others of the same group – Greeks, Poles, Germans, Japanese, Chinese, Jews, Lutherans, Catholics, and so on – and are taught by people from the same group. Valuable as this exclusive experience has been for those who choose it, this has not been the role of public education. One of the primary purposes of public education has been to create a national community, a definition of citizenship that is both expansive and inclusive.²⁰

The connotations of Ravitch's term, "same group," are unfortunate, implying as they do something sinister and anti-American about private education, as if parents who choose private or home-schooling could in anyway be linked with the self-serving, cultic epistemological concerns of those she has labelled "filiopietists." Is there some incontrovertible evidence that private schooling denies the multiculturalism of American traditions? Is there proof that private schooling hinders a respect for divergent viewpoints or disadvantages students seeking a well-rounded education? The evidence is, in fact, all on the other side of both of these questions. Why Ravitch reads the intentions of such

18 *Ibid.*, 339.

19 *Ibid.*, 351.

20 *Ibid.*, 352.

parents and the effects of private school curricula so nefariously is hard to fathom. It is at least as likely that parents who elect private schooling see themselves on a legitimate quest for *a restoration of a Western heritage that originally made room for them* — seeking not a more exclusivist America but for a more *inclusive* one, one that again is pluralistic enough to honor their ongoing contribution to the vitality of American culture.

I surmise that Ravitch is repeating the same mistake that Hirsch recently has made, that is, assuming that Western culture is simply the sum of its parts. Both Ravitch and Hirsch appear too willing to rehabilitate Western culture by simply surrendering it to its opponents — or at least to their vocabulary and rhetoric — by positing the West itself as a hodge-podge, syncretistic civilization that has no center or core already in place. When Hirsch defines cultural literacy in totemistic terms as the labels or capsules of books, ideas, and persons that permit conversation about them, when Ravitch characterizes the ethnic sources of Western civilization in merely culinary, aesthetic, or recreational terms, they at once trivialize and belittle Western civilization, reducing it to a list of tokens — a civilization stripped of its most important feature, its epistemology.

Historically, it was emphatically not the case — as Ravitch reports — that public schools emerged to “create” a national community or a definition of citizenship; *such a community and concept of citizenship already existed as a consensus in the public at large — and was enshrined in the founding documents of our nation.*²¹ The purpose of schooling, before Horace Mann and John Dewey, at least, was to transmit or ratify a heritage already in place, a Western heritage that, as Ravitch says, is already remarkably multi-ethnic. It has been the failure by and large of our schools to preserve and uphold that heritage, that epistemology indigenous to the West, that has created the current climate of crisis.²²

My point is this. We have for too long been defensive about Western civilization and what it represents. The West may be pluralistic, but it has never been *merely* syncretistic. That is to say, a participatory pluralism has always existed in the West that invites those ostensibly outside the Western tradition to share in and help shore up its essential respect for the human individual, its high regard for freedom and equality under law, and its vigorous pursuit of true knowledge. It has never been the case, however, that this was an invitation to supplant Western ideals of objective value with those personally suited to the advancement of particular groups or tribes.

The West is, in essence, itself a “particularist” and not a “pluralistic” paradigm, as Alasdair Macintyre uses the term, and can only be defended as such.²³ But it is a “particularist” position held with universal intent, that is, it is a worldview that validates itself by its openness to debate, testing, and ratification from those outside it. In the West,

21 Cf. Ronald H. Nash, *The Closing of the American Heart* (Waco: Word Books, 1990), 113-25.

22 Cf. Bruce L. Edwards, “Why Johnny Can’t Fail: The Ideological Basis of the Literacy Crisis.” *The Heritage Lectures*, No. 225.

23 Alasdair Macintyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); cf. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 52-65.

“the continuous quest for truth provides the basis for a sustained challenge to self-congratulatory claims for self-knowledge.”²⁴ There is, one might say, a modesty or a humility regarding knowledge in the West that is unremarked by its cultured despisers. By this I mean, there is a healthy respect for the partiality, the contingency, the limitedness of human knowledge over time. The pursuit of truth in the West is not the story of absolutists imposing their vision of reality on the unwilling, but the story of men and women aware that they are approximating totality, constructing models of the world with cumulative detail and refining interpretation.

Wholeness, completion, perfection – Western culture traditionally recognizes these as the province of God, of the transcendent order, and not products of human ingenuity or strength. By and large, learners and teachers in the West never see themselves as utterly innovative and novel, but rather as humble discoverers who incorporate new learning into the storehouse of knowledge ascertained and transmitted by a previous generation.

And yet there is room in the Western tradition – witness Judaism and Christianity – for the transcendent to “break through” to the temporal as revelation and which is then to be reinserted into the knowledge base held in common by the partakers of the West. Of course there have always been debates in the West about *just how* the mind relates to language and to the world at large, *just how* language assists in this grand scheme, but these may be seen as debates *within* a tradition, not debates about the tradition which houses the debate itself.

Should the West survive, it will be because we have once again recognized its merits and achievements and have not allowed them to be obscured by the deconstructionist onslaught. The West alone has provided mankind at large with, to put it somewhat primitively, a “big tent” that provides all comers with, so to speak, a “way outside,” outside the self, outside the provinciality of the local, the tribal, the national in search of eternal verities by which men might live, both as individuals and as societies. In its evolution, the West has developed an impressive array of checks and balances between the competing claims of reason, research, and revelation, that is to say, between rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism.

Admittedly, the tensions between reason and faith, between intuition and experience, have always been on center stage in Western thought, and have not always been resolved without contention or violence. As a Christian, I myself am wary and critical of the modern West’s tendencies to descend into secularism and thus to abandon or destroy the Judeo-Christian basis of its ethics and its law. I would not want to be construed as absolving Western civilization of its epistemological crimes against God or man.²⁵ But indubitably, the West has been the civilization most hospitable to theistic faith and the most self-conscious about the complexities involved in the claim to know. The West has

24 C. Jack Orr, “How Shall We Say ‘Reality is Socially Constructed Through Communication?’” *Central States Speech Journal* (Vol. 29), 267-69.

25 Cf. Bruce L. Edwards and Branson L. Woodard, “Wise as Serpents, Harmless as Doves: Christians and Contemporary Critical Theory,” *Christianity and Literature* (Vol. 39, No. 3; Spring 1990), 303-15.

never shrunk from the task of investigating and testing its epistemology – sometimes to its own injury.

Yet one would never know that this is the case in view of the incessant indictments against the West's putative ethnocentrism. Within deconstructionism, all ethnocentrisms are permissible, even warranted, *except* Western ethnocentrism. It is ironic to observe that it is only the Western tradition that makes possible the critique of ethnocentrism and that by positing an objective world and the means for investigating culture rigorously. Again, to quote Allan Bloom,

The scientific study of other cultures is almost exclusively a Western phenomenon, and in its origin was obviously connected with the search for new and better ways, or at least for validation of the hope that our own culture really was the better way, a validation for which there is no felt need in other cultures. If we are to learn from those cultures, we must wonder whether such scientific study is a good idea. Consistency would seem to require professors of openness to respect ethnocentrism or closedness they find everywhere else.²⁶

Conclusion. The genius of the Western worldview is its democratic nature. To know the truth, I need not be part of an elite or intelligentsia, I need only be human. In the West, the foundation of all free thought and inquiry is the unique personhood and humanity of man: *I am human, therefore, I may know the truth.* Access to truth, to the "real world," is the birthright of every man and every woman. Children and adults, men and women, truck drivers and medical doctors, rich or poor, even politicians and college professors, can lay claim to truth simply because it is within everyone's grasp by virtue of their being human, and their being in this world and not another. Accordingly, the key epistemological insight of the West is that which C. S. Lewis called "the doctrine of objective value" in his prophetic 1945 work, *The Abolition of Man*.

Richard Weaver once offered a defense of what he considered the "conservative worldview." Where he says "conservative," I read "Western":

It is my contention that a conservative is a realist, who believes that there is a structure of reality independent of his own will and desire. He believes that there is a creation which was here before him, which exists now not by just his sufferance, and which will be after he's gone.... Though this reality is independent of the individual, it is not hostile to him. It is in fact amenable by him in many ways, but it cannot be changed radically and arbitrarily. This is the cardinal point. The conservative holds that man in this world cannot make his will his law without any regard to limits and the fixed nature of things.²⁷

It is the deconstructionist notion that there is no "fixed nature of things," that there

26 Bloom, 36.

27 Richard Weaver, *Life Without Prejudice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 158-59.

cannot be supracultural truths that belong to no one specifically and everyone generically, that is the fundamental threat to learning, to liberty, to humane behavior, and to survival itself as we imagine the social world of the 21st century.

That there is a world out there – how ever many there may be “in here” – inhabited by others, other minds, other persons, and who knows what other kinds of creatures up and down the great chain of being – a world that may be known, described, named, not only as a private but also as a public fact, this is the great contribution of the West. It is this West that I would champion this afternoon and not the hundred caricatures, misconstruals, and outright distortions that are offered as straw men to be cast down by obscurantists who know neither the Western tradition, nor their own predilections for irrational thought.

The world as we know it is not the world as it once was. The world as we see it and experience it is not the world as it will be.

We now see through a glass darkly, but someday we shall see face to face. Now we know in part, then we shall know fully, even as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13:12-13).