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Academic freedom must be preserved

# Liberal arts most important

Allan Bloom is presently a professor in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto. He has published a translation and interpretive essay on Plato's Republic, and has recently completed a translation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Emile. At the end of this year Bloom will be leaving U of T to join the faculty of the University of Chicago.

This article originally appeared as a guest editorial in one of U of T's student papers, the newspaper.

I am grateful for the newspaper's invitation to write a guest editorial in these my last few weeks of teaching at the University of Toronto. Inasmuch as this is something of a valedictory, I shall take the occasion to repeat some of the themes — albeit disputed by many — which I never cease to utter about the university.

The core of a university is the liberal arts — the kind of knowledge which prepares a human being to be free of self-legislating. And the core of that core is philosophy — understood to be the quest for knowledge of the good life. This knowledge is the one thing most useful for every human being, and a man who has never reflected on this question can hardly be said to be fully human.

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A university's sacred function is to make its students aware of this, and, so far as lies in its power, to prepare them to pursue this quest throughout their lives. This means that both the content and the goal of liberal education are the same for all students and, in principle, at all times, for we all share the human condition, suffer from it and are in part responsible for it. Neither this university nor any other of which I know now fulfills this function and as time goes by it is gradually being forgotten.

I emphasized knowledge above, for the quest of which I speak is primarily a quest for knowledge, and in order to seek for knowledge one must be aware that one is ignorant. Socrates claimed that the substance of his wisdom was that he knew he was ignorant. Contrary to the general impression, most of us believe we know what is good, what the good life consists in. Socrates thought it a great achievement to become aware that the conventional wisdom is only

opinion. And he did not substitute other, new dogmatism for the old ones. Nor was he so dogmatic as to say that it is impossible to know the good. Rather he took it that the good could and must be sought, that we do not know enough to be dogmatists, and that we know too much to be skeptics.

This very awareness in itself alters our lives. What we do know is that there are certain fundamental problems; and because we know of them, we also know that we live in shadows, surrounded by darkness but with some access to the light. In this perspective, any life other than the one spent in seeking the light would be false and empty. Clarity is gained only by thinking about the problems, e.g. God, love, justice and death. That is done by questioning,

discussing the most common and the most serious opinions about these problems, by engaging in dialectic or following the Socratic way, with no end in view other than the truth.

Hence we need both a radical criticism of our received opinions, and we need a sense of the way to deal with our doubt. In our day there is but one way of beginning to satisfy both needs: the study of the Great Books, i.e. the classic statements of the profoundest alternative responses to the permanent problems. In particular we must study old books, because ancient writers are less likely to share the prejudices which seem like common-sense to us.

But the serious study of these books is becoming rarer and rarer, and with the disappearance of such study, there is

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a progressive loss of freedom of the mind, since real freedom means to know oneself and to know alternatives among which one can choose. We are left with a multiplicity of disciplines, each independent, each providing a career, none legitimately claiming the throne or able to provide the end in the light of which we judge the others and to which the others are made to contribute. Most students hardly conceive that the final ends can be an object of serious study or feel that such study is important for them.

Why is the study of the great books declining? It is because the universities are even more absorbed into the system of public opinion and utility. Every society has and requires certain beliefs which bind it together and certain pressing demands (such as feeding and protecting its members) which monopolize its activity. Any fundamental questioning of those beliefs or failure to cooperate in meeting those demands is subversive. The execution of Socrates is the constant warning to the useless or wicked man who does not share civil society's concerns and calls them into question. Decent or civilized societies have, however, recognized that their concerns might be questionable and that a society closed in on itself without some part of itself open to nature or the whole would be lacking something essential. Even though poverty or war seem to demand absolute commitment, there must be protection of some freedom from that commitment. Since the 18th Century, that privileged domain has been the university, and it is in this context that we should understand that now almost meaningless phrase, "Academic freedom".

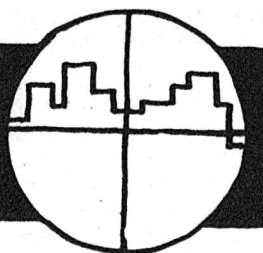
But in recent years the conviction that we know what the truth is and that our concerns are particularly pressing has eroded the independence of the university. On the one hand there was the university's service to government, business, labor, health care, pollution control and so on, which bloated the university so that it no longer has a recognizable visage or any unity of purpose. On the other hand, there was the student activism which sought to

harness the university to one particular cause or another and was actually just an extension of society's tyranny over thought. A student recently wrote in this newspaper that the university's sole purpose should be to promote equality. A university man would have responded that the sole concern of the university should be to discuss whether equality is just or not. The visible organ of the pincers attack on this university is the Governing Council in which students and persons from outside the university far outnumber the faculty, which is the only part of it whose vocation is commitment to the university.

I have been called a conservative and an elitist because of stands I have taken on university questions, but those stands were never motivated by external political issues but only by a concern for the integrity of the university, for real diversity of thoughtful opinion. These stands have largely been gestures, for universities are in shambles and intellectual conformity closes in upon us. (I do not accept dogmatism disguised as dissent to be anything but another form of conformity.) The universities have no kind of agreement whatsoever on what they mean by an education, they do not show the students the way, they do not counterbalance the powerful tendencies to be "relevant" (which means to view things as most people now view them).

But I am not utterly hopeless and in particular I am not hopeless about Toronto. Behind all the accretions, the idea of the university still lingers for the student with imagination. We now have a president who recognizes that liberal arts are important. And, although there is no general program which can guide students, there are many individual professors who know something about the great issues and can help to provide the humanizing inspiration students need. You have to find them yourselves, but they are there to be found. But most of all, I hope because of the many students I have known here who could become genuinely enthusiastic about the greatest books in an environment which gives little support to their enthusiasm. They learned of a world within themselves the existence of which they had hardly suspected. They give witness to Aristotle's dictum that man by nature desires to know, and such students have constituted the happiest part of my happy years in Toronto.

## FLESCOPE



### Burned Pat

#### GO YOUR OWN WAY

Once again the morons who run City Hall have used band-aid solutions to cure a heart attack. The Engineering Department came up with a brilliant idea called Project Uni. This is a plan to have traffic move one way northbound on the 5th Street Bridge and one way southbound on the High Level. This so-called cost cutting measure will cost \$3 million.

The cost breakdown is \$21 for "One Way" signs, \$50 for painting new road lines, \$1,500 for changing one traffic light and \$2,999,950 in public relations to be spent convincing

Edmontonians that they can't afford a new bridge. What we really need is a one way City Council — outbound.

#### FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

It's official now, Darren Bellstead is in love with themselves.

Personally, I would never stoop to write that there exists anything but business between Dean Olmstead and Sharon Bell (because it would be edited out). Let's just say that Dean's shadow outspent the Provincial Government last month.

After all this is not a gossip column. If you want to read a pack of lies, read Paul Rimstead or the editorial page.

#### WALTER'S BUCK PASSING

Clover Bar MLA Walter Buck wants Alberta's Secreds to change their names to "Social Conservatives" because Social Credit has become a laughable dinosaur. Apparently, being anything but a Conservative means political doom.

The idea has caught on with the other parties, such as the New Democratic Conservative Party, Taylor's Conservative Albertans, and the Communist Conservative Party.

This has become a big problem for the U of A's Progressive Students Association (PSA) who have become the Progressive Conservative Students Association (PCSA).

In a related story, anyone wishing to buy a slightly used asp call Cheryl or Brian at 432-4241. TO HELL NHL

Torontonians are pissed off because the WHA has rejected expansion. The WHA was considering allowing 17 NHL cities to join the big time. Each NHL team will be allowed to keep two goalies and two skaters and all other players would go back to the WHA teams who hold their draft rights. Entry fees would be a modest \$6 million per team. The WHA turned down the plan when the Edmonton Oilers Booster Club promised that if the Montreal Canadiens ever show up in the Coliseum they will publicly urinate on them. According to Booster Club President Neanderthal Drumbeat it's their way of returning 50 cases of Molson's Canadian they have no use for.

In Toronto people are boycotting Alberta oil until the Maple Leafs are allowed into the WHA. They're not drinking one drop until they're in.