CULTIVATING HUMANITY

have been taught in the last generation, but even that class has a focus on citizenship and on issues of the day that would not have been characteristic of the philosophical academy a while back. The St. Lawrence program involves a radical reform of a curriculum formerly focused on Europe and North America. The emphasis on ethnic studies at Riverside is part of a complex transformation of that curriculum to incorporate a variety of approaches to human diversity. Eric Chalmers encountered an English assignment that would have been unknown in Reno, Nevada, until very recently, part of a diversity movement that still generates intense controversy on campus. Scott Braithwaite laments the absence of such changes in the BYU curriculum. The University of Chicago, like most major U.S. law schools, devotes more attention to issues of race in response to interests of students and faculty. Unlike many such efforts, Chicago’s focuses on the humanistic imagination as well as on factual knowledge.

Our campuses educate our citizens. Becoming an educated citizen means learning a lot of facts and mastering techniques of reasoning. But it means something more. It means learning how to be a human being capable of love and imagination. We may continue to produce narrow citizens who have difficulty understanding people different from themselves, whose imaginations rarely venture beyond their local setting. It is all too easy for the moral imagination to become narrow in this way. Think of Charles Dickens’ image of bad citizenship in A Christmas Carol, in his portrait of the ghost of Jacob Marley, who visits Scrooge to warn him of the dangers of a blunted imagination. Marley’s ghost drags through all eternity a chain made of cash boxes, because in life his imagination never ventured outside the walls of his successful business to encounter the lives of the men and women around him, men and women of different social class and background. We produce all too many citizens who are like Marley’s ghost, and like Scrooge before he walked out to see what the world around him contained. But we have the opportunity to do better, and now we are beginning to seize that opportunity. That is not “political correctness”; that is the cultivation of humanity.

from CULTIVATING HUMANITY: A
Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education

CHAPTER ONE

Socratic Self-Examination

Martha Nussbaum

If I tell you that this is the greatest good for a human being, to engage every day in arguments about virtue and the other things you have heard me talk about, examining both myself and others, and if I tell you that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being, you will be even less likely to believe what I am saying. But that’s the way it is, gentlemen, as I claim, though it’s not easy to convince you of it.

Socrates, in Plato, Apology 38a

The Old Education, in Aristophanes’ portrait, acculturated young citizens to traditional values. They learned to internalize and to love their traditions, and they were discouraged from questioning them. As Aristophanes sees it, the most dangerous opponent of this Old Education is Socrates, whose questions subvert the authority of tradition, who recognizes no authority but that of reason, asking even the gods to give a reasoned account of their preferences and commands. Socrates’ “Think-Academy” is depicted as a source of civic corruption, where young people learn to justify beating their parents. This fictional attack fed a real suspicion of the Socratic way of life. Athenian leaders, unsettled at the idea that young people would search for arguments to justify their beliefs rather than simply following parents and civic authorities, blamed Socrates for the cultural disarray they sensed around them. Charged with corrupting the young, he eventually forfeited his life.

The ancient debate between Socrates and his enemies is of value for our present educational controversies. Like Socrates, our colleges and universities are being charged with corruption of the young. Seeing young people emerge from modern “Think-Academies” with many challenges to tradi-
tional thinking—about women, about race, about social justice, about patriotism—social conservatives of many kinds have suggested that these universities are homes for the corrupt thinking of a radical elite whose ultimate aim is the subversion of the social fabric. Once again an education that promotes acculturation to the time-honored traditions of “Western Civilization” is being defended against a more Socratic education that insists on teaching students to think for themselves. At institutions of the most varied sorts, students are indeed asking questions and challenging the authority of tradition.

At Notre Dame University in South Bend, Indiana, students in a course on science and human values, taught by philosopher Philip Quinn, fulfill the institution’s two-semester philosophy requirement. Quinn, a Catholic who left Brown University for Notre Dame because he wished to teach in a Catholic institution, sees the requirement as a way of getting even the most passive students to think for themselves and to argue for their beliefs. Most students in the class say that the philosophy requirement has made them better Catholics by forcing them to defend their choices with arguments. Several students dissent. Speaking for this group, Kevin Janicki, a tall, athletic blond man, says that philosophy has led him to question his Catholic faith by forcing him to notice how little rational argument is in evidence when the university administration handles issues relating to women and homosexuality. They ask you to take philosophy and ask questions, and then they ask you to obey authority and to ask no questions. He stands in the back of the crowded classroom puzzled.

At Belmont University, a Baptist institution in Nashville, Tennessee, I spend the day talking about ancient Greek ethics to a group of remarkably eager and well-informed students. Then I go over to Professor Ginger Justus’ house for an informal supper with philosophy majors. Justus, a gifted young philosophy teacher, greets the students warmly; her voice crackles with humor. As we all sit around on the floor eating, the students tell me of their decision to major in philosophy at a time when that department has recently won permission to separate itself from the religion department. They love what they are doing, they tell me, but many of their friends have dropped them. They are under strong parental pressure not to associate with them, since philosophy majors are thought to be tainted by “secular humanism.”

At Brown University just before Christmas I meet with my three senior honors thesis advisees for 1995. Amy Meselson is writing about the Stoics and Aristotle on free will and determinism. She trudges in early to discuss the twenty single-spaced pages of meticulous textual analysis she has given me that morning. Nicole Li, a second-generation citizen of Chinese and British origins, is writing about women and revenge, connecting ancient Greek accounts with modern ethical and legal arguments. She brings me a new book on justifiable homicide, asking me to be sure to read it in the next two days (along with two others she gave me the week before) so that she can take them all home to Seattle for vacation. Liliana Garcés is writing about philosophical and religious arguments for and against abortion in her native country of Colombia, from which she emigrated to the United States at age twelve, speaking no English. (Her mother worked as a janitor to send her through parochial schools, and now works as a beautician.) A serene, lucid woman with a lightly accented voice (and a 4.0 average in philosophy), Liliana is about to return to Medellin to conduct interviews over the vacation. We go over her interview questions before discussing her law school application. Two of these three thesis topics would have been unknown in an American philosophy program even fifteen years ago. And yet those two are just as much in the ancient Greek tradition as the first one—like the writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius in the tradition of critical reflection stemming from Socrates, applying concepts from philosophy to the analysis and criticism of one’s own culture.

At the Cambridge health club, Billy Tucker has received a good grade in his first philosophy test, about Socrates and his arguments. As we talk across the counter, he exudes pride and enthusiasm. He thought philosophy was for people in the Ivy League, and now he knows he can do it. Krishna Mallick has been asking them to use the techniques they learned in thinking about Socrates to analyze arguments in the newspaper. Tucker reports that he is detecting lots of fallacies. Next week they will stage a classroom debate about Dr. Kevorkian and the morality of his conduct. Tucker is surprised that he was asked to find arguments for a position that he does not hold.

Philosophical questioning arises wherever people are. These students are discovering that philosophy is not an abstract, remote discipline, but one that is woven, as Socrates’ arguments were woven, into the fabric of their daily lives, their discussions of life and death, abortion and revenge, institutional justice and religion. Philosophy breaks out wherever people are encouraged to think for themselves, questioning in a Socratic way. For all
these students, philosophy supplies something that formerly was lacking—an active control or grasp of questions, the ability to make distinctions, a style of interaction that does not rest on mere assertion and counterassertion—all of which they find important to their lives with themselves and one another.

In colleges and universities around the country, students are following Socrates, questioning their views to discover how far they survive the test of argument. Although Socratic procedures have been familiar for a long time in basic philosophy courses, philosophy is now reaching a far larger number of students than it did fifty years ago, students of all classes and backgrounds and religious origins. And philosophy, which at one time was taught as a remote and abstract discipline, is increasingly being linked to the analysis and criticism of current events and ideas. Instead of learning logical analysis in a vacuum, students now learn to dissect the arguments they find in newspapers, to argue about current controversies in medicine and law and sports, to think critically about the foundations of their political and even religious views.

To parents in contemporary America, as to parents in the time of Socrates, such developments can appear very unsettling. Argument seems like a cold strange invader into the habits of the home. The father in Aristophanes came home one day to encounter an argument in favor of father-beating. The parents of the philosophy majors at Belmont may encounter “secular humanism” at the end of the semester, where previously there had been traditional Christianity. Nicole Li’s parents send her to Brown and find her making arguments in defense of women who take extralegal revenge against their abusers. The Socratic emphasis on reason seems not only subversive but also cold. To kind and affectionate people, it can seem insulting to demand an argument for some political belief they have long held and have taught to their children. It can appear that their cherished traditions must now undergo scrutiny from the point of view of an elite intellectual world that is strange to them. It is not surprising that the proliferation of “applied ethics” courses, and of philosophy generally, in our colleges and universities should alarm many parents.

Tradition is one foe of Socratic reason. But Socrates has other enemies as well. His values are assailed by the left as well as by the right. It is fashionable today in progressive intellectual circles to say that rational argument is a male Western device, in its very nature subversive of the equality of women and minorities and non-Western people. Socratic argument is suspected, here again, of being arrogant and elitist—but in this case the elitism is seen as that of a dominant Western intellectual tradition that has persistently marginalized outsiders. The very pretense that one is engaged in the disinterested pursuit of truth can be a handy screen for prejudice. Such critics would look askance at the thesis projects of Liliana Garcés and Nicole Li: as powerless, marginalized people, they are allowing themselves to be co-opted by the dominant liberal tradition when they devote their energies to rational argument in the Socratic tradition.

But Socrates’ opponents on the left make the same error as do his conservative opponents, when they suppose that argument is subversive of democratic values. Socratic argument is not undemocratic. Nor is it subversive of the just claims of excluded people. In fact, as Socrates knew, it is essential to a strong democracy and to any lasting pursuit of justice. In order to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a marketplace of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good, we must produce citizens who have the Socratic capacity to reason about their beliefs. It is not good for democracy when people vote on the basis of sentiments they have absorbed from talk-radio and have never questioned. This failure to think critically produces a democracy in which people talk at one another but never have a genuine dialogue. In such an atmosphere bad arguments pass for good arguments, and prejudice can all too easily masquerade as reason. To unmask prejudice and to secure justice, we need argument, an essential tool of civic freedom.

Liberal education in our colleges and universities is, and should be, Socratic, committed to the activation of each student’s independent mind and to the production of a community that can genuinely reason together about a problem, not simply trade claims and counterclaims. Despite our allegiances to families and traditions, despite our diverse interests in correcting injustices to groups within our nation, we can and should reason together in a Socratic way, and our campuses should prepare us to do so. By looking at this goal of a community of reason as it emerges in the thought of Socrates and the Greek Stoics, we can show its dignity and its importance for democratic self-government. Connecting this idea to the teaching of philosophy in undergraduate courses of many sorts, we shall see that it is not Socratic education, but its absence, that would be fatal to the health of our society.