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# *Method and Civic Education*

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## **1. Introduction**

Ceux qui, comme porte nostre usage, entreprenent d'une mesme leçon & pareille mesure de conduite, regenter plusieurs esprits de si diverses mesures & formes: ce n'est pas merveille, si en tout un peuple d'enfants, ils en rencontrent à peine deux ou trois, qui rapportent quelque juste fruit de leur discipline.

De l'institution des enfans, Montaigne

For more than a generation in the United States, and now increasingly in Europe, students have shown growing interest in the “tradition” of political theory. This particular literary practice is often said to be one of the guiding intellectual threads of the Western tradition as a whole. It is remarkable, therefore, that historically this “tradition” has had practically no professional practitioners. Its recent formation into an academic “discipline” appears to be a by-product of the modern aspiration to a “science of politics,” the tensions inherent in which required at one and the same time a rejection and an acknowledgment of past political thought.<sup>1</sup> But institutional efforts to consolidate a field do not explain its popularity. Indeed, with the spirit of anti-politics so pervasive

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This essay is dedicated to Peter Brown, who seems to understand better than I do the approach to teaching described below, and to Byron Nichols, who prompted me to write it.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. John G. Gunnell, *The Descent of Political Theory: The Genealogy of an American Vocation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

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around the world, one is hard-pressed to understand the simultaneous intensification of curiosity about fundamental questions of politics. Yet, that is what the revival of political theory represents.

Perspicuous writers in this “tradition” have understood that no transformations in political life are more powerful than the ones which come with generational change. Some kind of control over the formation of new citizens is essential to politics. Thus, even in the perspective of momentary decision-making, politics must engage learning processes. Education, then, is where the subject matter of political theory meets the revived interest in that intellectual enterprise.

While it comes before us as a literary practice, political theory is primarily constituted through and constitutive of dialogue (in the broadest sense of that term). For this reason political theory stands in a special relation to mainstream practices of education for young adults in the United States. These practices, despite notable efforts to multiply student activity and dialogue, are mainly oriented by something almost entirely anti-dialogical: the peculiarly modern idea of Method. Please note that many of the commonsense connotations of the word “method”—orderly, systematic, careful, coherent, etc.—are not subject to critique in this essay. Our attention will focus, rather, on a specific but far-reaching movement of Early Modernity and its subsequent articulations. This idea and ideal of Method will be brought forward just below.

*Political theory constituted through dialogue; Method is anti-dialogical.*

The purpose of this essay is twofold: first, to reconsider this distinction between Method and political theory<sup>2</sup>; secondly, to show how the teaching of political theory exemplifies certain practical educational opportunities which might be used to counteract the negative effects of our “Methodistic” orientation.<sup>3</sup> I also aim to de-naturalize the word *Method*, which has become so familiar that we no longer know what it means. Recalling its history will ease the task of showing why the kind of teaching exemplified by political theory—but certainly not limited to it—is more than ever crucial to a satisfactory education for citizens.

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<sup>2</sup> When Sheldon S. Wolin made this incisive distinction, he failed to understand the historical transformations of Method and the place of political theory within rhetorical, as opposed to philosophical, traditions. Cf. Sheldon S. Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation,” *American Political Science Review* (December 1969).

<sup>3</sup> The word *Methodistic* in this essay does not refer to the eighteenth-century religious movement.

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## 2. What is Method?

Method is a pattern for activity and a set of claims concerning the significance of that activity. A few clear and distinct formal steps will get you where you want to go. These steps can be set down in instructions anyone can follow. That is the practical, winning, and apparently efficient modern ideal of Method from its early formulations by Petrus Ramus (1515–1572) in the sixteenth century to the present day.

*Content of Method may be anything.*

To focus on this ideal of Method *as such*, we must temporarily step outside of many of the familiar debates about educational practice. Such contested topics as progressive vs. conservative, lax vs. tight standards, or classical vs. multicultural content will not be central concerns here. With the field thus cleared, the allegiance to Method becomes everywhere visible. From the textbook and the test to the lab and the lecture, there presides the standard put forward by the world's best-known Ramist, René Descartes, in his *Discours de la méthode*<sup>4</sup>: start from clear and distinct ideas, divide the matter into parts, proceed in order from the simple to the complex, and omit nothing. The *content* of this process *may be anything*: from bits of information and formulas to the elaborate conceptualizations that Max Weber eventually called *ideal types*. But in high schools and universities, the desire to educate, the social imperative to transmit knowledge, more often than not takes this Methodistic form.

*Method a mechanism for equalization of society.*

Method has been tied to some admirable social goals. Descartes presents himself as the enemy of dogma. We may find premature the political view he ultimately traced to Method, which for example implied that civil disobedience is out of order for the *cogito*, as he called the thinking—and, thus, we must assume, the learning—subject.<sup>5</sup> However, Cartesian politics is only one (and a rather slight) consequence to be drawn from Method. Viewed more broadly, Method has clearly been a mechanism for the extension and equalization of society. Emerging early on as a kind of intellectual capital that could be individually appropriated but not owned, Method was a fruitful and generative machinery. Aspiring to be *all form* and *no content*, the knowledge machinery of Method could be reproduced with ease and set in motion any-

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<sup>4</sup> René Descartes, “Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences . . .” (Leyde: I. Maire, 1637), Part II.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Part III.

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where, by anyone. It increasingly became available to a wide variety of people and applicable in many different situations. By the nineteenth century, Method seemed the perfect educational implement for increasingly mass democracy.

Nonetheless, allegiance to the modern ideal of Method also raises up some perilous obstacles for an education oriented towards the general formation of independent, well-rounded and free-thinking citizens. It is these obstacles to democracy that I shall underscore in this essay.

In brief, education oriented by Method tends radically to reduce many registers of history and experience and to cover over the inherent plurality of knowledge. Method aims to deliver some *one* thing to students. But in the theater of education, as on the public stage of the world for which education prepares the citizen, the expectation for “unity of action” is bound to be disappointed. And it should be. *To know* is a process constituted by necessarily different and often cognitively irreconcilable parts. Democratic education must not only present this plurality but foster it as well. Unity of action in educational practice is a facade. Even granting that an imposition of certain types of intellectual orderliness is extremely important at the level of primary education, unity of knowledge and vision become impediments as the student becomes an adult. Allegiance to Method blocks us from taking this fact seriously. To do so would reveal a vista of entirely different forces. The gravitational center of education would shift. The problem to be solved by, for, and with students would become: How, in both thought and action, can one appreciate and thrive on plurality?

*Allegiance to Method obscures plurality of knowledge.*

For, plurality is what generates the *life* in *the life of the mind*. This is true whether that mind goes to work at the office, the court, the factory, the school, or stays home to take care of the kids. *To know* is a constituent element of freedom, not because it permits mastery of the world (although it sometimes does that) but because the plural character of knowing creates a space of possibility and the potential for action. To understand the world we have to understand *like* the world is. This correspondence coincides with the capacity for action.

My purpose here is to come at the problem of education from one of its most fundamental components: the living relationship between teacher and student, and how that relationship is mediated by the matters they undertake to consider together. In this

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respect, my concerns arise in the realm of ethics and lead towards the life citizens live together. The following considerations point to real and consequential choices and commitments for the teacher who takes seriously the contradictory relationship between democracy and the Method-orientation of education. Only at our own risk do we exclude this aspect of the ethical situation of the teacher from the public debate over educational policy.

This inquiry is motivated by a particular aspect of my own experience as a teacher. I have noticed that political theory is especially resistant to the widely subscribed idea and practice of Method. This resistance presents some special difficulties in teaching “the most comprehensive master science” (as Aristotle called it in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b) in a context where Method-orientation is the rule. I will use the friction represented by, but certainly not limited to, the teaching of political theory to define a special potential for transformation already present within the contemporary liberal arts and sciences curriculum.

### 3. *Modernity and Method*

In the 1920s, Jakob Klein suggested that one great highway to “Modernity” was opened with the historical appearance in the sixteenth century of *abstract* numbers.<sup>6</sup> The novelty in this is hard to grasp but can hardly be overstated. Numbers had been considered, for example by Aristotle and the Aristotelians, as properties and, as such, always instantiated in something. What happens after Viète and Descartes is that “the intellect understands ‘fiveness’ as something separate from five objects.”<sup>7</sup> This transformation operates on number from both sides: it cuts number off from the property it was understood to measure, and it frees it from space and time to allow thereby its application to everything. This change in the character of possible knowledge was unusually consequential. It traced out what would become a pervasive pattern. Where abstraction *to* universals was conceivable before, math-

*Mathematics pushed as form of knowledge not grounded in experience.*

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<sup>6</sup> Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968 [first published in 1936]).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Gaukroger, “The Nature of Abstract Reasoning: Philosophical Aspects of Descartes’ Work in Algebra,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, ed. John Cottingham (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 110. It is, of course, the peculiarity of this *practice* to which Wittgenstein responds in his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*.

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ematics became the paradigm for a whole system of understanding that *is* abstract. It was increasingly taken to be the universal language of science because of this new completeness of its abstraction. It was pushed more and more explicitly as a form of knowledge not grounded in experience.<sup>8</sup> Not about anything in particular, it seemed to be about everything in general. Cutting ties to any particular circumstances, it promised the broadest application of knowledge. Thus, it became possible to believe—in the famous words used by Galileo in his *Il Saggiatore*—that truth is written in scripture and in nature, that “*grandissimo libro scritto in lingua mathematica.*”<sup>9</sup> This language is not tied down by the irksome problem of reference. Not surprisingly, as Method develops hand-in-hand with the ideology of mathematics, one of its most powerful claims is to *universality*.

Of course, not everyone towed this line. Early in the twentieth century thinkers as diverse as Dewey, Bergson, Benjamin, and Heidegger raised the stakes. The “experience” from which mathematics seeks to escape is not only the sensationalism often identified with Locke or later hard-headed empiricists. It is, more importantly here, the experience that accretes in a human being as the result of a long history of *doing* and thus cannot be separated from temporality and memory. Based in action, experience takes shape through the common language and stories of a particular community. An anti-Cartesianism, developing from Spinoza and Vico to Hegel and George Herbert Mead, made clear that experience in this sense always involves other people. After Kant rocketed Method into broader circulation, conventionalists like Mach, Duhem, and Poincaré tried to cut it down to size. Even Karl Popper understood Method as a social crucible. All these various ways of thinking seemed new because they appeared against the backdrop of modernity, inscribed as it was with Method. In fact, the idea that others have an essential part in one’s experience has roots deeper than Western philosophy itself. Even for Plato, that paradigmatic idealist and in many respects a natural affiliate for Descartes, knowledge would best be attained in the sort of experi-

*Based in action, historical experience always involves others.*

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Paolo Rossi, *Clavis universalis; arti mnemoniche e logica combinatoria da Lullo a Leibniz* (Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1960).

<sup>9</sup> From *Il Saggiatore*, cited in Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 13.

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ence that depended on the presence of others and the chance circumstances they might bring to that subtle interplay of the known and the unknown, *dialectic*. In this process there were no pre-established steps, only a desire to achieve clarity and avoid contradiction. As spelled out in his *Gorgias*, Plato's conditions for dialectic amount to exacting but personalized qualities . . . like previous knowledge (*episteme*), goodwill (*eunoia*), and the courage to speak the truth (*parrhesia*). These qualities, in turn, did not establish a formal grid. Rather, they aimed at nurturing a sort of friendship that makes dialectical conversation productive of knowledge (*Gorgias* 487 et passim).

"Imaginary  
experiment"  
displaced  
historical  
experience as  
basis of  
knowledge.

Nonetheless, fissures often opened between knowledge and experience. This required some way of mediating between the two. In early modernity, the "imaginary experiment" could occupy this position because "the study of nature in the seventeenth century was neither predominantly idealistic nor empirical . . . it was first and foremost *constructive*."<sup>10</sup> That is, the relevant experience was no longer *what you had lived*, but *what you could make* under controlled conditions of logic or the laboratory. A recent direction in historiography of science has shown that much of this making (*poiesis*) in the seventeenth century was not limited to the laboratory, but also occurred in the rhetorical practices of writing.<sup>11</sup> Generally, *the known* became more and more the product of a limited and increasingly self-contained process of making. Abstract number, and its mathematical language, was quite at home in this abstract space of practice.

Riding the vehicle of *constructivism*, the paradoxical split between experience and knowledge extended from the mathematical and laboratory sciences to the study of humanity. When Hobbes wrote that we must "feign the world to be annihilated" and then, like "a watch or some such small engine," build it up again through the "Art" by which "is created that great LEVIA-

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<sup>10</sup> Funkenstein, 178, and David Rapport Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989), passim. See also E. J. Dijksterhuis, *The Mechanization of the World Picture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. e.g. Peter Dear, "Narratives, Anecdotes, and Experiments: Turning Experience into Science in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Literary Structure of Scientific Argument*, ed. Peter Dear (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991) and Giovanna Cleonice Cifoletti, *Quaestio sive aequatio: la nozione di problema nelle Regulae* (Florence: European University Institute, 1989).

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THAN called a COMMON-WEALTH or STATE," he was doing for politics what Descartes did for epistemology.<sup>12</sup>

Fed, at first in a trickle, by an approach to education centered on the idea of Method, this abstract constructivism had consequences for the *knower* as well as the known.<sup>13</sup> Method appears quite early in the popular form of printed manuals, instructing people, for instance, on how to dance or play the lute.<sup>14</sup> The shift to higher culture comes with Petrus Ramus, whose work is definitive both in its impact on the core curriculum and its sweeping success. Almost a century before Descartes, Ramus and his associates made Method an instrument of the religion-charged politics of knowledge in Paris. It is not only because Ramus converted to Protestantism in 1561—and was “martyred” in 1572—that Protestants everywhere adopted his approach. As we shall see, Ramism ran in a line parallel to the decisive Protestant practice of sidestepping Church authority to engage the holy text one-on-one.

Ramist Method was trained on rhetoric and logic but radically reordered the relation between them. From rhetoric’s traditional division of discursive activity, Ramus reassigns the constructive parts of discovery (*inventio*) and arrangement (*dispositio*) to logic, leaving to rhetoric only the increasingly vacuous style and delivery, as the fifth part, memory, dwindled to nothing in the age of print. This appropriation by Ramist Method allowed for a series of distinct and ordered steps from which anyone could learn the matter at hand. It made extensive use of charts, divided into dichotomies, as reductive aids to memory. Ramus was “the greatest master of the shortcut the world has ever known.”<sup>15</sup> Method was

*Ramus offered Method as shortcut to knowledge.*

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. Molesworth (London: J. Bohn, 1839-45), I, 91, and *De Cive*, cited in Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 246-47; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. MacPherson (New York: Penguin, 1968), introduction.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Walter J. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956); F. P. Graves, *Peter Ramus and the Educational Reform of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: 1912); Donald Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge, 1983); Nelly Bruyère, *Méthode et dialectique dans l'oeuvre de La Ramée* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> Such manuals could also be explicit about their own political significance and relation to other traditions. Cf. Thoinot Arbeau [pseudonym of Jehan Tabourot], *Orchesographie. Et traicte en forme de dialogue, par lequel toutes personnes peuvent facilement apprendre & practiquer l'honneste exercice des dances* (1589), who calls dance “vn art fort beau & neceffaire a la chofe publique . . .” (page 1).

<sup>15</sup> Craig Hardin, *The Enchanted Glass* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936), cited in Ong (1956), 3.

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offered as a quick way to get at types of knowledge which previously had required a long process of accretion through practice. Involving a shift from talking to thinking, it could be undertaken by one person alone. The attractions of Ramist Method exerted an especially strong pull on what Perry Miller called “the New England Mind,” and “at Harvard College . . . the Ramean method was the one approved.” Indeed, the “teaching of Ramus was, as it now seems to us, a preparation for that of Descartes, and the inferences from it proved friendly to what turned out to be the new science.”<sup>16</sup> In the words with which Tocqueville would later begin the sequel to *de la Démocratie en Amérique*,

*L’Amérique est donc l’un des pays du monde où l’on étudie le moins et où l’on suit le mieux les préceptes de Descartes. Cela ne doit pas surprendre.*<sup>17</sup>

*Discourse displaced by isolated intellectual activity.*

Common knowledge has it that, once upon a time, education was mired in memorization and rote repetition. Indeed, before mechanically printed books became available, a significant part of the educational process was taken up with transcribing spoken words into written ones. This created in the student habits of language and created for the student an important material resource—a book. Nonetheless, it still linked the student back to primarily oral-aural practices. It is not merely coincidental that Ramism was contemporaneous with the explosion of mechanized printing in the sixteenth century which not only put the spoken word down on paper but undermined its cultural priority. Ramism’s shift from dialectic to the new logic, “from the art of discourse to the art of reason” (which is to say to the “art of thinking . . . [understood as an] individualized, isolated intellectual activity”) exploited and facilitated this transformation—with extraordinary consequences for education.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York: American Book Company, 1938), 28-29. Cf. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (New York: MacMillan, 1939) and Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 102-106.

<sup>17</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *de la Démocratie en Amérique*, livre II, chapitre premier.

<sup>18</sup> Cp. Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), 53-76.

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#### *4. The Ethical Function of Apprenticeship is Undermined by Method*

Let us underscore just one aspect of the situation subsequently transformed by Method: earlier education largely involved a sort of apprenticeship. While, from a legal point of view, it is true that an apprentice was connected to a master through a contract, and the scribbler-to-be engaged in a kind of barter with his tutor, the day-to-day practices which eventually produced long-term results were largely the same: the knowledgeable and the neophyte were linked through showing, doing, making, talking, imitation, and eventually invention. A typical intellectual formation involved a working and re-working of materials in the company of others. This process was characterized by various types of dialogue. Apparently repetitive and rigid, apprenticeship nonetheless almost never involved the reduction and synthesis that later Method-izers took as conditions for the consistent reproduction of the same object (material or mental) in the same way by any person whatsoever.<sup>19</sup> The benefits that accrued to the students from these practices could not be had outside the relation to a Master.<sup>20</sup>

What Method seemed to provide was a way to circumvent the “master of the art” and still arrive at the same end. Thus, in addition to its technical value—across the range from logic to engineering—Method offered a systematic approach to self-mastery. It complemented other well-known powerful modern trends which constituted the “individual.” Releasing the student from burdensome engagements with other people, Method amplified powerful economic incentives to undertake one’s own formation. It facilitated a solipsistic self-training and foreshortened the long period of explicitly social formation of the self which characterized apprenticeship. Method yanked the self out from both customary and more explicitly constructed experience in the hope that the self could be cultivated even when it could not afford to take the time to run its own course.

*Method facilitated solipsistic self-training.*

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<sup>19</sup> Indeed, it may be mainly the diremption of these two practices which makes ridiculous attempts to revive “rote” learning; without the guiding frame of a personalized relationship, this is deadening. By contrast, no one can say that jazz musicians who “woodshed” their scales do not attain the freedom of their art.

<sup>20</sup> The increasing use of internships in some areas of higher education may be seen as an attempt to recapture some of the benefits of apprenticeship without its burdens. However, internships form a relatively small part of the overall educational *formation*, especially in the traditional liberal arts.

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That this could be a source of elation was recognized right away. In *The Lawiers Logike* (London: 1588), written only fourteen years after the first English translation of Ramus's *Logic*, Abraham Fraunce mimicked with vicious sarcasm the defensive reaction he knew full well would meet his—and every—application of Ramism:

Good God, what a world is this? . . . Ramus rules abroade, Ramus at home, and who but Ramus? . . . harebrayne boyes will needs bee Masters that never were Scholars, prate of methods, who never knew order . . . Hereby it comes to passe that every cobler can cogge a Syllogisme . . .

*Method releases practitioners from responsibility to others.*

At the same time, the peculiarity of such aspirations may be underscored by contrast to works of authors roughly contemporary with Ramus. Other, sharply different versions of *methodus* were proposed.<sup>21</sup> An obviously antithetical pedagogy is proposed by Thomas Elyot in his *The Boke Named the Governour* (1531), in which educational results depend entirely on the cultivation of a relationship between the child and the people surrounding him. Elyot's Platonic program for training an elite of ethical magistrates is overcome by the growth of social equality over the next two centuries, even if it resurfaces briefly in a form for "everyman" in Rousseau's *Emile* or Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. Montaigne is a more telling example. Montaigne is anti-Methodistic not so much because he preceded Method, or even because he attacked it, but because he belonged in some way to an ethically oriented pedagogical tradition that Method itself would eventually demolish.<sup>22</sup> This can be seen indirectly: while Ramus set himself against scholasticism,<sup>23</sup> what Ramism chipped away at was a *Bildungsweg* heavily reliant on the social model of apprenticeship. Montaigne was anything but a scholastic, yet, from his training to his teachings, he belonged to this dialogically oriented approach to the cultivation of the self. Even Montaigne's famous misanthropic tendency is antithetical to the individualism promoted by Method

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<sup>21</sup> E.g. Zabarella, *De methodis* (1578). Zabarella placed his emphasis on the cultivation of *habitus* and practical reason.

<sup>22</sup> Nancy S. Struever, *Theory as Practice: Ethical Inquiry in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> See his *Dialecticae institutiones* and *Aristotelicae animadversiones*, which aim to reshape logic, displacing its widespread Aristotelian version, and endow it with the power of *inventio*, formerly found in and taught through the province of rhetoric.

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because, in the *Essays*, self-fashioning remains explicitly embedded in the particularity of experience and in relationships with fellow human beings. Method releases the person who applies it from responsibility to others and disengages from the world to conquer it.<sup>24</sup> Montaigne—even while taking his distance from it—engages the world to discover the constitution of a responsible person.

Earlier forms of education recognized that fundamental aspects of human character can neither be taught nor learned directly. “Character” emerged, rather, as a secondary consequence of long-term relationships between master and pupil that had been put in place to achieve a different and, in a sense, technical end. Severing the apprenticeship relationship, Method produced a different type of secondary consequences. Economizing on the student’s limited time, it also had an impact on the kind of knowledge the student gained concerning himself and his relations to others.

### *5. Method and the Social Organization of Knowledge*

In the formation and maintenance of the modern disciplines the role of Method is well-known. The adoption of Method as a strategy of conceptual and eventually institutional organization helped educational entrepreneurs in nineteenth-century America to deliver valuable technical skills and thus to further expand their schools. This development had an impact on associated liberal arts curricula. Opportunities for building a creative, supple and responsible character in the student, which had been inherent in the older processes of transferring information, lost their ground to such an extent that, by the eighteenth century, the question of moral development had to be explicitly brought back into the debate about education.<sup>25</sup> By the nineteenth century, the circumstantial formation of ethical character was increasingly replaced by that artificial and abstract discipline of behavior we now call, simply, discipline. The study of ethics, which previously had occurred throughout the student years, and a responsible character, which had emerged from prolonged engagement with tutors and fellows,

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<sup>24</sup> Thus, the now famous connection between Method and “technical rationality.”

<sup>25</sup> Cf. e.g. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

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held on by only a thread in nineteenth-century America, having typically been reduced to a single course conducted (often by the President of the college) during the final year. This suggests the extent to which, concerning moral matters, students were increasingly left to fend for themselves.

The complicity of Method in the transformation of the “self” into the modern “individual” also passes through the emergence of that peculiarly modern entity called “the social.” That the modern social order would depend on individualization, often with perverse consequences, was clear from the eighteenth century forward; it is as much in evidence in the *Federalist Papers* as in the *Communist Manifesto*. Again, the role of Method in the formation of society—and thus, through this indirect additional route, in the formation of individuals—has been less obvious. An apprentice copied and patterned himself on one person, his master. Groups comprising the apprentices of a particular master, amplifying the authority he already possessed from skill, fame, and contract, may have promoted a certain mutual curiosity and competitiveness amongst themselves. But the essence of the *lien* which bound them into a group lay elsewhere. As those who had learned from a master instead obtained their skills from Method, whether tutored or untutored, the sheer number of people who followed one pedagogical path and shaped themselves to its singular pattern greatly increased.

What was the “social” component that ordered this larger group? Writers like Michel Foucault have noted that *drilling*, backed by practices of surveillance and punishment, become extremely important with the rise of modern institutions like professional armies, public schools, and prisons. Such practices continued to be animated by particular persons. But unlike the master of a practical art, sergeants, principals, and wardens embody and engage with the group primarily through rules. It is not by chance that Weber uses the word *rationalization* to refer both to what happened to bookkeeping and to the bureaucratization of institutions. While Method is part of this rationalizing process, it constitutes a different kind of authority and thus a different kind of social group from the ones discussed by Foucault. Likewise, despite the intimate connections between the development of the modern legal system and the Methodistic movement,<sup>26</sup> the legal subject—pri-

*Method leads to self-enforced conformism.*

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. e.g. Donald Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge. 1983).

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marily identified as being sanctionable by the force of the State—is not the same as the self constituted by Method and the group to which it belongs. Unlike the legal or otherwise “disciplined” subject, the person who has successfully escaped from apprenticeship, susceptible to Method’s peculiar formation of the self because self-educating through Method, was subject to controlling judgments by anyone who knew the Method. This new sort of checkable and sanction-guiding common knowledge replaced “common sense” as the connection-constituting fact of distinct communities like the Academic disciplines. A new kind of group emerged from this diffuse appropriation of a single, apparently impersonal point of reference for self-fashioning under the watchful eye of a whole population oriented in the same manner. It is a group in which the distinctively social phenomenon of conformism gained enormous power and, in turn, became itself a resource that certain actors can exploit (a fact characteristic of, e.g., “consumerism” and mass marketing).

Why the combination of social and technical shortcuts offered by Method began to attract adherents in the sixteenth century, and the nature of the social logic driving this tendency for the subsequent four hundred years, are matters much too vast to elaborate further here. What must be stressed is that the social consequences just described were for the most part unforeseen by the early adherents of Method. Viewing those consequences in retrospect, it is easy to forget the original motives underlying this historical development. The major attraction of Method was that it provided a formidable kind of release from personal dependence and a mode of access to valuable knowledge previously available only through contract and submission. This must have been a general and powerful incentive as Method came quickly to pervade the new form of society it helped to constitute. In sum, Method seemed unequivocally to offer *learners* a new measure of what Adam Smith referred to in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1767) as “self-command,” a kind of *personal independence*.

If we ask *independence from what?*, one answer brings us back to where we began: Method granted the student independence from a learning process richly inscribed in relationships with other people and the world. And because apprenticeship was not simply identical with the specific skills purveyed by tutors and pro-

Logos  
granted  
*independence*  
from ethos.

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fessors, but an integrative *rhetorical model of education*, Method also granted *logos* independence from *ethos*. The rhetorical model that joined reason and the everyday experience of being together was demolished—economically, conceptually, institutionally—by the educational pattern corresponding to Method, which deepened and extended the divide between the learning process and experience. This divide is represented decisively in the seventeenth century when Descartes and Hobbes assign a distinct and fundamental position to Reason in the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>27</sup> This is the same Reason that will become a benchmark in Kant’s distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, between experience and reason, which serves as a basis for the new disciplinary constitution of the “human sciences” in the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

Rationalist adherents to Method (like Descartes or Hobbes) insisted that all persons who applied their Reason to move from one step to the next would arrive at the same conclusion. But the full effectiveness of the Method came to light in its application to the artificially controlled making of experience itself. More and more, *experimenters* began to insist that their experiments could be *repeated by anyone* ready to follow the Method. The early Methodizers knew perfectly well that this process involved more than the arrangement of test-tubes. An early “experimenter” like Boyle, writes Peter Dear, established the generality of his claims by painstakingly building “an appropriate kind of argumentative framework” within which the “singular experiment” could “stand for the universal experience.”<sup>29</sup> Once this argumentative framework began to settle in as a commonplace of culture, Boyle’s followers, already with Newton and more clearly among those who came after, could appeal to Method without bothering to justify its social implications.

The paradox of this Methodistic experimentalism was that while experience was being rewritten as something made by human beings and under their control, it was also being detached from the circumstances of any particular person. This detachment

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<sup>27</sup> Although, again, Ong stresses that, well before Descartes and Hobbes, and almost with greater success in his own time, it was Ramus who transformed the “art of discourse” into the “art of reason.”

<sup>28</sup> Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1981).

<sup>29</sup> Dear, 161-62. Cf. Steven Shapin and Simon Shaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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appears in what has been called the “social construction” of the modern conception of objectivity.<sup>30</sup> Method, by guaranteeing repeatability across a broader social space, where “personal knowledge”<sup>31</sup> could not be counted on to insure uniformity, became the co-signatory of what we now call *empirical* science (with its scope vastly reduced from the idea of *εμπειρία* as experience in general) and thus a tacit but forceful partner in our common sense of what is real and what is not. This allegiance between Method and the empirical continues to the present day through influential thinkers like Karl Popper. It is what sustains the intensity of methodological debates and the distinction between disciplines, a division of labor which in turn makes possible the formation of so-called “symbolic capital” in the institutionalization of knowledge.

*“Social construction” of objectivity detaches experience from circumstances.*

Whether we consider the rationalist or the empiricist path, the developments sketched here can be seen to work together. They moved the theory of knowledge and the practice of education away from experience as it had traditionally been understood, i.e. as what happens to and thus forms a person, as a function of and in the tempo of nature rather than artifice. The rationalist attempted to ignore that experience altogether. The empiricist, flagrantly borrowing his name from the ancient Greek word for our ongoing happenstance engagement with the world to express almost its opposite, transformed the concept of experience itself to include only what a person makes and masters.

## **6. Method and the Textbook Model**

From the matrix of the Method-izing movements of the sixteenth century springs the modern academic teaching manual or textbook. With exceptions that mainly prove the rule, academic teaching in the twentieth century developed a thoroughgoing reliance on this instrument. That this remains true today is indicated

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. e.g. Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988) and Lorraine Daston, “Objectivity and the escape from perspective” in *The Science Studies Reader*, ed. Mario Biagioli (New York: Routledge, 1999), 110-123. From another angle, cf. Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Michael Polanyi, *Local Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), who argues against the hegemony of Method by insisting on the centrality of “personal knowledge” but does not see how the former exploits the necessary breakdown of the latter under certain conditions.

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by the textbook's exaggerated price, which is a function of "artificially" created demand, and not simply a consequence of its "inherent merits" or the cost of production.

*Formal  
structure of  
textbooks  
derived from  
Method.*

It bears repeating that the successful intervention of Method in the educational process would hardly have been possible without the ready-made and portable printed book. As books became cheaper and more available, schooling institutions reorganized to take advantage of them. At the same time, the content of books changed to take advantage of Method. This made the books more easily exploitable by schools which, in turn, continued to transform themselves so as to further deploy the books and the edicts of Method which the books both contained and exemplified. While it is not clear exactly how and when the books influenced by Methodistic pedagogy in this circular process became the full-blown authoritative textbooks with which we are familiar today, one writer sees as pivotal the combination of Ramist framing with the travel books of Venetian diplomats, resulting in a new genre that taught "travelers how to act, how to collect information and how to write of one's experience."<sup>32</sup> Whatever the source, the eventual formal structure embodied in the textbook—reductivist, comprehensive, rigidly schematizing divisions of divisions of the subject matter, diagrammatic and visual rather than aural-oral in orientation—was importantly derived from Method. As teachers taught from textbooks and students learned from them, knowledge was adapted to forms amenable to Method, i.e. to the "teachable" and "learnable" forms which had preoccupied Ramus. Those contacts between teachers and students which did not affirm the formal structure of Method, or contradicted it, began to lose their relevance to the educational process. It is true that the older, informal, or non-formal, dialogical relationship between teachers and students persisted in some of the most privileged educational institutions in the United States until recently. But, today, even dialogical exploration has been captured by the Methodist movement in an attempt to rationalize and thus sell the distinctiveness of the American small liberal arts college.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Yngve Troye Nordkvelle, *Internationalising the school—critical perspectives on the "globalisation"-process of the Nordic school*. Arbeidsnotat no. 82 (1999), Lillehammer College. <http://www.hil.no/biblioteket/forskning/Arb82/82-04.htm>, paraphrasing Justin Stagl, *A History of Curiosity: The Theory of Travel, 1550-1800* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Consider, for example, the market of consultants in "collaborative learning."

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Again, a circular pattern appears. For, the casting of knowledge and knowledge practices in Method-oriented textbooks accelerated the formation of the modern disciplines. The disciplines both authorized the contents of the textbooks and were defined by those contents.

Disciplines are—from a mid-level sociological point of view—artificial societies for the propagation, common-sharing, and internal regulation of a certain type of formalized experience which establishes a distinct body of knowledge. Only by emphasizing repeatable practices and insisting on conformity to those practices can the defining experience be made relevant to and (more or less) identical for all members of the group. The accepted textbook is the means by which the standards for this process are established and extended beyond a single location (i.e. one laboratory, one department). The reductionism of Method defines common practices in a manner in fact repeatable by anyone. Yet, this reductionism has other consequences. For instance, it transforms the role of the teacher. The teacher once stood as a source of information who continually, through dialogue, deepened and complicated simplistic facts and whose person provided a practical paradigm to be imitated by the student. With the rise of the textbook, the main function of the teacher became ensuring conformity. The authority built up in the figure of the teacher over hundreds of years was sacrificed to guarantee the authority of the discipline. And, for the student, the representative of the discipline, its bible, was the textbook. Logic, not dialectic, was his guide.

*Teacher's main role reduced to enforcing conformity.*

If Method was a form of liberation, the Methodistic textbook was a complementary form of power. It replaced the skill-transferring activity of apprenticeship. What was ultimately more important, though, was that the textbook placed skills in more hands than ever before, without paying attention to who owned those hands. Nonetheless, when the textbook form was taken up to fulfill the deeply contradictory demand to “democratize” the liberal arts education, the result was a profound transformation in the relation between experience and knowledge. The textbook form applied to the rhetorical world of speech condensed it into the grammatical schema. The complex fabric of a Livy or Gibbon became the tidy chronological march of an H. G. Wells in his *Outline of History* (1920). Would-be trekkers on the “grand tour” eventually found it cheaper to stay home with neatly arranged manuals like William Henry Goodyear’s *A History of Art; for Classes, Art-*

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*Students, and Tourists in Europe* (1888). Exactly the central feature of Method—its formalism and general applicability—opened the way for its accommodation to contents that were “high” (e.g. the formal mathematical proof) and “low” (e.g. the “how-to pamphlet”), and to an equally wide variety of contexts, from the kitchen to the college classroom. Its egalitarian thrust made of the Methodistic textbook a ready ally for other social trends exemplified in and accelerated by the American and French Revolutions. With new technics and an ideological will to publish, mass-produced and inexpensive books constituted a lucrative new literary market in which these textbooks took an increasingly large share.

The mentality of Method was centered in the textbook but radiated out from there. It carried a definitive social desire for equality of treatment into battle in the field of pedagogy. The consequences, however, were perverse. Political aspirations of democratic revolution came to justify an extraordinary degree of rationalization in the very space where education was ongoing. Methodistic revision was wrought on everything from the shape of a student’s script to the seat in which she sat. On the one hand, this produced a uniformity and narrow practical latitude. On the other hand, the Methodistic approach to group discipline made every student a judge of every other student’s comportment. Here we see the—always surprising, but predictable—bridge between equality of treatment and the amplification of conformity as a self-regulating form of social control. The textbook did to the mind what the fixed desk did to the body.

### *7. The Experience of Education*

While Ramus was a progenitor of Descartes, Ramism (in name and, later, in effect) produced in practice this strange solution to the “mind-body” problem: Method constituted homologous structures in the mental operation of thinking, in the bodily reflexes of thinkers, and in their worldly environment. Not everyone was happy with this solution. The long-term tendency I describe here suffered some major setbacks. From time to time, Method fell under attack as important social forces tried to re-rhetorize pedagogy by returning dialogue to the center of the educational process. Whether you count them as successful or as failures, the efforts of Pestalozzi, Montessori, and Dewey, or the movements they in-

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spired, may be understood as attempts to diminish the negative consequences of Method in a democratic age.

Nonetheless, the Methodistic orientation continues to set the rules in American education today. Sometimes this is obvious and sometimes not. It would be hard to find a clearer example than the standardized test, which is, so to speak, simply the negative image of the textbook. Yet, where new technologies allow more surface complexity into the educational process, the fundamental influence of Method may be difficult to discern. This means we should look harder. For, in fact, changes which are supposedly “revolutionizing” education—like computerization or the “electronic classroom”—for the most part fall into the same basic Methodistic patterns of reduction, standardization, and reproducibility. This fact is not counter-balanced, and may even be amplified, by the possibility that such technologies provide us with access to ever more “units” of information.

The impact of Method on the immediate experience of education is more important. The teacher, as much as the student, follows the “lead” of animated inanimate forces outside his control, and thus becomes less and less responsive to the real-life interactive workings of practical reason.<sup>34</sup> While the authoritative textbook was an imposition on, and displaced to some extent, the average professor, at least, where the content warranted commentary, it could be read aloud in an ironic tone. Irony is not a sorting parameter for the “search-engines” which select sites from the “world wide web.” Granted: irony is not a predominant feature of textbooks. Nonetheless, this evocative gesture remains among the resources inherent in the use of books which can—by slowing, interrupting, or re-figuring a mental image—transform the practice of reading. By contrast, a snide comment about the internet on the internet does not disrupt the “interface” between the user and the machine, any more than a TV pundit who says “People! Turn off your TV!” moves the hands of viewers towards the “off” button. This kind of fundamental difference makes the replacement of one technology by another—of books by computers—more than just a

*Influence of Method amplified by new technologies.*

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<sup>34</sup> The word “interactive” as commonly used to describe video or “virtual-reality” games is profoundly misleading: it refers simply to a stimulus-response relation between a machine and the sense and motor organs of a person; *action* has nothing to do with this. Why a machine that can do more, and calculate more, is less responsive to practical reason is too complicated to develop here.

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matter of re-tooling. Qualities such as judgment-informed-by-erudition that once validated the onerous and interminable process of becoming a professor are becoming excess baggage for the de-skilled (or “re-trained”) academic worker who turns on and off the student’s computer and monitors the watching of monitors. Graduate programs are adjusting accordingly.<sup>35</sup>

*Reductionism  
implicit in  
“virtual  
reality”  
begins from  
an already  
reduced basis.*

It has become fashionable to see “virtual reality” as something new and potentially beneficial for education. As we have seen here, the main idea of “virtual reality” is as old as Modernity. Insofar as it severs the connection between education and experience it should be counted as a variation on the themes of the Methodistic movement. It replays the process begun with the “imaginary experiment” and extended through the worldview of “constructivism.” Of course, the surrounding conditions have changed and certain aspects of “virtual reality” are new. There are significant differences between a pre-Methodistic gloss, a Ramist schemata, a nineteenth-century chapter outline with study questions, and a constellation of free-floating paragraphs traversable by hyper-links on the World Wide Web. Nevertheless, even these differences may be understood as moments in a very long-term historical trend. The successive accretion of these new literary forms and their predominance in educational practice must have had a cumulative effect. Ignore for the moment the practical question of the relationship between teacher and student which is the main concern of this essay. Consider just the information transmitted in the educational process. Experience becomes information through selection and representation. This reductionism was explicit in Methodistic practices; an argument was made on its behalf, and certain of its benefits clearly felt. To a large extent “virtual reality” merely continues this. But the reductionism implicit in the ideal of “virtuality” begins from a different basis, operating on what has already been selected and represented—by other literary forms, such as books or movies, by language itself, or by the socially configured imagination which must always start from its own *reality* to map out a *virtual* one. While instruments like the internet seem to provide us with immeasurably more information

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<sup>35</sup> For example, by increasing the non-content component of “teacher-training,” or emphasizing (as academic employers will later) the capacity to generate “excitement” or “enthusiasm” in students that is external to the subject matter, and then freighting the “content” on board once the student is already in motion.

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than the dialogical or rhetorical settings of the student-teacher relationship, the base from which “virtual reality” operates its reductions is in important respects *smaller*.

The specific reductionism of “virtual reality” does not only produce (roughly speaking) epistemological effects on isolated individuals sitting in front of their computer screens. It also alters the disciplines, those artificial societies in which Method is diffused to keep all members on the same track. While disciplines age, and while what may have first erupted in opposition to existing institutional arrangements and powers becomes itself an institution and power, something else is happening within the internal “political” structure of such associative practices. Symbols of authority have increasingly been transferred to inanimate objects. With the rise of Method and the disciplines, the positive image of authority required for initiating new members began to appear in the textbook instead of in the professor. Nonetheless, this transfer was incomplete: even when the professor did nothing but recite by heart the pages of his textbook, this positive authority was embodied in (or conveyed by) the presence of a *knowledgeable human being*. In the last two generations, the new technology of *animated* inanimate objects has facilitated the transfer of this authority from the book to the video screen—to televisions and computers. Again this continues the Methodistic trend. On the one hand, the transfer of information is separated from a human presence. The screen allows for the emergence of a context in which human beings, which is to say speaking agents, have authority only when authorized by the screen. On the other hand, the television perfectly sends and receives information while providing that omniscience upon which self-regulation of communities through conformism and discipline depends.<sup>36</sup> Everyone can have an opinion about everything, and each person is invited to express it. Students raised on this kind of exchange do not develop a capacity to distinguish between justified and unjustifiable opinions. They lack judgment. It is worth emphasizing that this argument is not a defense of authority *per se*, nor is it an expression of nostalgia for professors who used their position to abuse their students. But authority does not simply disappear from the world; one must ask, then, where

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<sup>36</sup> Thus, whatever pleasure attracts viewers to “reality” shows, it seems likely that the function of such shows is to reaffirm more or less explicitly television as the locus for the creation of the norms of authority.

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*Dialogue  
essential to  
formation and  
mobilization  
of judgment.*

it has gone and whether this migration is good or bad for the self-government of human beings living together.

Whatever the benefits of these latest adventures in the Methodist movement, there are costs as well. It is one thing for people to be bad students. Where the development of judgment is at stake, however, bad students are likely to become inept citizens. In one sense, the link between the new technologies and inept citizenship is obvious. Talking to a screen and talking to a person are not the same thing. This is a problem because democracy depends on dialogue in which something important for everyone is at stake. However, the problem is more complicated because dialogue involves not only the exchange of information but the formation and mobilization of judgment. If one thinks of dialogue as just the application of a capacity or a series of speech acts, this will be hard to see. In fact, dialogue constitutes a particular kind of ethical situation. This situation brings into play some very basic human capacities for learning and constitutes *the meaning of this capacity to learn*. Thus, whatever diminishes the capacity for dialogue reduces as well the ethical ground on which stands the kind of teaching necessary for the formation of the practical reason of citizens.

Here, in brief, is what I mean.<sup>37</sup> Dialogue produces relatively limited direct effects. For this reason it is often denigrated as “just talk.” Lacking concern for its indirect effects, the Methodizers deemed dialogue to be inefficient and deficient. The way dialogue creates a rupture between talk and action, however, can also be a virtue. Face-to-face dialogue constitutes a space for personal experimentation that is relatively safe. This *personal* experimentation may include testing one’s courage, taking stock of one’s beliefs, checking the effect of one’s ideas, and so forth. This experimentation is fruitful only when it leads to personal adjustment—that is, when one learns from it. The utility of limited efficacy is simply this: when stakes are low, uninhibited self-correction is possible, whereas when stakes are high, change is difficult and costly. There is a difference between a good school and the “school of hard knocks.” One may learn from both, but what one learns *about taking the chances necessary to further learning* is quite different.

The school, then, has this specific ethical potential: it can cre-

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<sup>37</sup> This ethical aspect of dialogue is different from what appears in the so-called “communicative ethics” of K. O. Apel and Jürgen Habermas.

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ate an environment in which dialogue works its effects on character by constituting a space of relatively safe experimentation. Other language practices—like studying a textbook or website, or taking notes—may also involve a kind of experimentation. However, they cannot play the same role in education as dialogue. In a sense, they are too safe. Perhaps the student will eventually be held responsible for repeating what he has read, viewed, or noted. But that responsibility is measured in the test. There are no such stakes *inherent* in the very act of reading, viewing, or noting. The student is taking things in, forming a hidden reservoir of the self. Dialogue, however, is an act of externalization and self-exposure. The way the *self* is in the world is the substance of judgment; the capacity for judgment makes or breaks the *self*. The risk taken in dialogue is exposure of the *self* to ridicule or manipulation; the benefit obtained from dialogue is judgment, the value of which is quickly evident for the normal person in everyday life: simply, things go better if you know what to do *right now*. Thus, dialogue undertaken in the spirit of self-correction, which is to say authentic *education*, invites a heightened degree of personal risk precisely because it is safe but not entirely without costs.

*Dialogue a space for testing oneself with limited risks.*

These complex circumstantial conditions, combined with the relational nature of dialogue, impose mutual responsibilities on both teacher and student. Dialogical education derives from this ethical moment of responsibility a special sort of *reality*: a student's experiments are checked and balanced from outside, not by the unidentifiable (and thus uncriticizable) forces of conformism imposed by Method, but by a person exercising and holding up for emulation his own practical reason. This thoroughly differentiates the safe-experimentation and risk-taking of dialogue from what occurs in the isolation of so-called "virtual reality."

Thus, again, the continuing application and institutionalization of Method undermines a crucial ethical component of education. It also transforms the roles of the participants in the educational process. With the obviously false belief that anyone can do or be anything, commitment to being a Teacher or a Student declines. When the relation between "units of information" and persons appears as a matter of instantaneous and costless free choice, and is not necessarily linked to the particularities of the matter at hand or the peculiarities of the persons before you, the dedication to experience suffers. Allegiance to Method, to the textbook model and

*Method undermines educational roles and dedication to experience.*

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to its elaboration through the new technologies, facilitates these shifts.

### 8. "Ethical Objects of Inquiry"

*Method  
separates  
education  
from  
real life.*

John Dewey noticed long ago something that remains true. When people talk about education, the word "experience" typically refers to what takes place outside the institutionalized learning process. A sort of categorical break is presupposed between two contexts: the world, where one goes for "experience," and the classroom, where one goes to "learn." This distinction is obviously false. While the world is certainly not a classroom, the classroom is certainly a world, or part of the world. To think sensibly about education, the fact that the places of contact between teacher and student, and between authoritative objects and students, are locations of experience must be taken more seriously than usually occurs. These sites have many of the same kinds of structural conditions and constraints as other locations of experience. The Method-oriented approach to education tacitly, but with a great and institutionalized constraining force, denies this. That the claim on which this denial rests is false does not diminish its effectiveness. Just as a student's character and life situation do not change simply by entering a classroom, so too must the Methodistic denial of this fact be understood as bound up with the student's hopes, fears, or interests. This tension between, roughly speaking, appearance and reality complicates the relationship between inquiry and the objects of inquiry. At stake here is what we can expect in the cultivation of the student.

I shall not consider here the validity of the philosophical claim that no sharp distinction between "matters" and "methods" can be sustained.<sup>38</sup> For heuristic reasons, however, that distinction is worth keeping in mind. To inquire into power, justice, human suffering, the nature of community, and so forth, is to tackle problems in which the inquirer and his companions are necessarily implicated. No Method will entirely interrupt this implication. In this sense, such traditional topics of political theory are *ethical objects*

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. G. W. H. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Introduction; also Theodor W. Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976) and a critique of Adorno by Karl Popper in his *The Myth of the Framework: In Defense of Science and Rationality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

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*of inquiry*, distinguishable from *scientific objects of inquiry*. This distinction is similar to the standard classification of *moral* or *human* versus *natural* sciences promoted in the nineteenth century by John Stuart Mill and Wilhelm Dilthey. While I do not pretend to have the last word in a long debate, the idea of an “ethical object of inquiry” is useful here because it underscores the manner in which the inquirer engages his object and thus keeps the problem of Method in focus. By contrast, the Mill/Dilthey distinction refers to qualities supposed to inhere in the object (and based on a purportedly more fundamental ontological distinction between the “human” and the “natural”). The point I want to underscore here is that the Methodistic aim to remove all traces of the object of inquiry from the manner of inquiry cannot be achieved when it comes to ethical objects of inquiry.

In an important sense, a scientific object of inquiry can be separated from experience. A rock not surrounded by the web of human relationships would still be a rock. It does not much matter if we are not attentive to what happens to the rock when it is brought into a teaching or learning situation to become an object of inquiry. It may be that some methods will not help us to discover anything interesting about the rock, but they will not change it from one thing into another.

The ethical object of inquiry is different. It cannot be separated from experience. One reason for this is straightforward: *the object of inquiry is intimately bound up with practical reason itself, the capacity to act in particular circumstances*. If you lift an ethical object of inquiry out of experience to teach or learn about it, it is no longer the same thing. It makes a difference if the language we study is *our* language, for in studying we are speaking it. It makes a difference if the history we study is *our* history, for in studying it we are living it. Thus, a Methodistic approach to ethical objects of inquiry leads to this problem: the object requires of the inquirer a constant shifting of ground and readjustment, a kind of suppleness and reflexivity in the manner of inquiry which the strictures of Method will not permit. Ethical knowledge can only be accomplished through ongoing dialogue. Even “halfway” measures for the training of ethical judgment—like “role-playing” or “simulation” games—do not respond adequately to this problem.

*Ethical knowledge bound up with capacity to act in particular circumstances.*

Please note that this way of drawing the distinction between different sorts of objects of inquiry depends on a certain under-

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standing of the word “ethical.” In Book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle noted an ambivalence in the notion of ethics. There is the word *ethos*, referring to the common habits and practices of a community, and the apparently etymologically related word *ethike*, pointing to a regular system of praise and blame and, from a “sociological” point of view, based on *ethos*. Thus, when the word “ethical” brings before us the quality and consistency of human character, it is properly understood as referring to what we are as a result of the everyday fact of living together with other people and the subsequent fact that in a particular time and place some acts are better and others worse. This is the link to the rectitude and propriety that characterize effective judgment.<sup>39</sup> It matters not one whit that what is better or worse or right or proper is constantly contested. What does matter here is this: if it is true that ethical objects of inquiry can only be investigated “in experience,” how are teacher and student to deal with the consequent confusion of the learning process with what is being investigated?

*The world not  
a classroom,  
but classroom  
should be a  
world.*

This is, so to speak, a trick question. I do not propose that we “leave” the ethical object of inquiry in its “natural” habitat and send students out into the world to study it.<sup>40</sup> The world is not a classroom. The fact that the ethical object of inquiry is necessarily transformed when it enters the classroom cannot be avoided. This fact should, rather, be embraced. This involves an approach to the practical interaction between teachers and students that runs strongly against the grain of Method and its implements. The classroom needs to be made into a world.

Let me be clear. Of course, the classroom is not the *whole* world—the very existence of the practice of schooling presupposes this distinction. Likewise, to insist that the ethical object of inquiry is constituted through the learning process is not to say that it is *entirely* or *only* so constituted. My assertions are made relative to what the Methodistic approach offers. In this light, a “worldly” classroom is one which operates through a complex and self-aware type of interaction and dialogue between master and apprentice. Something similar is already employed within professions which give substantial weight to their own ethical element:

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<sup>39</sup> What I refer to as “ethical” is arguably the correct interpretation of *ethos* in the famous rhetorical triad of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*.

<sup>40</sup> There are, of course, some things that cannot be studied in schools. Ethnography has its place.

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residents are not practicing doctors; clerks are not practicing judges. But the liberal arts do not train students for a profession. They are training for citizenship. It is around the formation of citizens, then, that the reintroduction of some kind of contemporary democratic parallel to the pre-modern apprenticeship relation would have to be figured.

Here, the substantive problem of forming a citizen's capacity for judgment and an appropriate pattern of pedagogical activity converge *against Method*.

The ethical object of inquiry itself is *constituted as an object* through the learning process. This occurs first in the classroom and then, through the development of dispositions and patterns of language use, in the world at large. Fluid boundaries between the object and the learning processes make this side of education a risky business; Method defends against this risk before teaching even begins, and thus disallows the ethical benefits it can bring. Yet successful study of ethical objects of inquiry is only possible by taking into account this complex mix.

*Ethical objects of inquiry constituted through learning process.*

The concern for citizenship which is inherent in the liberal arts education brings us to the exemplary case of political theory. To take into account that the object of inquiry in political theory—that is, the citizen—is constituted through the learning process is to acknowledge that by *studying* political theory one is also *doing* it.

Consider the following examples: a town meeting; Mr. President in the Oval Office; Althusius' *Politica methodice digesta*. These entities are political because we attribute that significance to them through a certain type of language. If they could exist outside the web of human relationships (which they cannot) they would in any event not have this significance. Now, I am not saying that anyone can attribute this significance to anything by simply mouthing certain words. Political discourse is ordered by a wide variety of internal constraints; someone who attempts such an attribution without respecting contemporary *sensus communis* and the pressuring expectations of others will fail.

Within the order of political discourse, a person who invokes its terms produces with one gesture two effects which are relevant here. The first is an effect on the object: it gains a name or an attribute it did not have before. The second effect is that the terms themselves are reshaped and elaborated. This two-sided fact itself

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fits into the life of the citizen in a two-sided way. The terms of political discourse invoked to study society are the same ones that give political significance to our own lives and allow the creation of a distinctively political space for speech and action.

Political theory thus illustrates with particular clarity something that is true for ethical objects of inquiry in general. The conduct of our political lives and the conduct of inquiry are necessarily interrelated. This relation between matters and methods is sewn into a broader web of human relationships. By reaching to be exempt from “matters,” a Method-orientation to education evades recognition of this fact. It denies the ethical character of its object. In the case of political theory, a Method-orientation misses both what is most interesting about it and the source of its utility.

### 9. *The “Ethical” Basis of Political Theory*

Bernard Williams reminds us that the ethical question in its original Socratic form was simply “How should I live?”<sup>41</sup> One should keep in mind, however, that for Ancients like the Babylonians and the Egyptians, or the writers of the Code of Hammurabi and the Pentateuch, or Plato and Aristotle, the identity of that “I” was understood necessarily to involve other people. Thus, “How should I live?” could not be disentangled from the political question “How should *we* live?”

*“I” and “we”  
questions  
necessarily  
connected.*

With the emergence of autonomous “society”—a transformation noted first in the eighteenth century by Scottish philosophers, made thematic by Rousseau and his followers, and incorporated into sociological common sense today—responses to questions about the “We” have been carried forward by a logic that often seems independent of and different from what appears in responses to questions about the “I.” Moreover, in the last two centuries there has been enormous pressure to frame questions about the direction of collective life as “I” questions. This is sometimes referred to as a shift from a “virtue” to an “interest” paradigm of politics. In this context there arise some of the most contradictory and frustrating tensions in modern political life and in the theoretical works which are a part of it. For, no matter how individualized or solitary the formulation of the question, there are always

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<sup>41</sup> Bernard Arthur Owen Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

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other “I”s asking homologous questions and this fact shapes in crucial ways the life of the first “I.” Thus, at the heart of these tensions a necessary, although enormously complicated, connection between “I” and “We” questions persists.

We may accept that an “ancient” model of politics—explicitly ethical—and a “modern” liberal constitutional model—with its bold attempt to separate moral and political life—divide importantly around fundamental questions concerning *identity* or *subjectivity*. But there is also a crucial continuity that cuts across both. Every person lives within an individuality which is necessarily a function of the plurality of the world, a plurality that is in turn a function of individualities. Thus, while liberalism makes certain resulting tensions more precise and insistent, it does not overcome the persistent, and in fact unavoidable, intermingling of the political question “How should we live?” with the ethical question “How should I live?” At least as a matter of practice (rather than ontology), this double structure reflects an aspect of the human condition.

Because we are active beings, and not rocks, the directions and forces of our plurality are unpredictable. Plurality in action issues in what generativists at the turn of the twentieth century might have called “the uninterrupted genesis of the qualitatively new.”<sup>42</sup> As Hannah Arendt made abundantly clear, this historical process is irreversible, and thus at any moment the content of the form is everything; the messiness and disorder of plurality cannot be methodically “cleaned up” after the fact.<sup>43</sup> Nor can it be overcome by reducing its parts to one, over-arching scheme for the simple reason that further active and material differences are formed by diverse responses to such frames and explode them.<sup>44</sup>

This is why unpredictable plurality cannot be suppressed for long. Rather, it must be accepted as the first condition for answering the question “How should we live?” Since “I” am of this “we,” one is drawn inexorably back to the complementary ethical question: “How should I live?” That is what makes political theory an

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<sup>42</sup> Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein* (Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand Verlag, 1968), 326.

<sup>43</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>44</sup> Religious doctrines are, of course, the paramount example of such efforts; all things considered, no one religious doctrine can displace all others.

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ethical object of inquiry and what makes plurality its most important topic.

That terms like these might describe teaching in other areas is a virtue, not a fault, of my argument. Political theory exemplifies something quite general. Moreover, it is also of special interest because it thematizes precisely those civic concerns which appear at the heart of the humanities and a liberal arts education. Let us pursue this example further.

### ***10. Political Theory Against Method***

*Historical investigation itself part of history.*

To investigate the traditional topics of political theory (power, justice, citizenship, etc.) as well as the new ones (race, gender, commodity production, etc.) always involves actively situating oneself with respect to the object investigated. Only in this process does the particular object to be examined come into being. Even then, it is not stable. The object is historical. The investigation itself is part of its history. The object always escapes the frame imposed on it. Thus, the study of political theory is a particularly effective way to show that the instrumentalism of Method is self-defeating; every “tool” applied to political understanding becomes obsolete with its first application as the judgment of the citizen takes its place.

This dialectical quality of political theory has consequences not only for what one learns, but also for how one learns it. While the engagement of *investigator* with *investigated* changes the object, it also registers (no matter how microscopically) in the formation of a person’s character. As “just another experience among many,” the learning process becomes commensurable with present experiences and effective in subsequent ones.

One might say—concomitant with the fact that, as Aristotle suggested, with speech human beings become “political animals”—that political theory stands for the humanities as a whole, not merely because of its civic interests, but because of its thoroughly practical relation to language. As one elaborates the terms of political discourse that permeate everyday speech, the learning process becomes part of the student’s political understanding and facilitates the extension of understanding in the imagination. While its investigations certainly involve a multitude of questions like “What did the Greeks really think about work?” or “Why did

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the revolutionaries cut off the head of the king?" or "Was Lenin a Stalinist *avant la lettre*?", political theory joins these together under one rubric. No matter how elaborately "contextualized," the coherence of political theory lies in the investigation of the grammatical first person. In studying political theory, students must ask "How should we live and what is my part in that?" Since this question is every time asked from within a different life situation, each person *must* answer for him- or herself. And because (political) experience is constituted in the communal world of relations to things and other persons, no one can answer the political question alone. Thus, one learns about plurality, or more exactly one *learns plurality*, through the practice of doing theory and not from the assertions or propositions or maxims of moralists and professors.

To take seriously these conditions of *our* relationship in and through language is to explode basic presuppositions of a Method-oriented approach to education. Students who study political theory, by virtue of their own independence and sense of implication in the learning process, become troublemakers in other domains. This is why the Method-orientation has such difficulty setting up camp on the terrain of political theory. The *necessary* connections between experience and political theory block its advance.

*Connections between experience and political theory block Method's advance.*

### ***11. The Centrality of Language in Political Theory***

In the preceding section I meant to suggest four things. First, plurality is irreducibly at the heart of politics. This claim can shed light on debates about "pluralism," "multiculturalism," or "individualism," yet it is deeper than these ideological positions.<sup>45</sup> Second, teaching political theory involves getting at and activating this plurality. Third, teaching political theory is ultimately a part of political life because the activation of plurality involves both the formation of character (the basis for answering the question "How should I live?") and the creation of political energy in the readiness to think and act collectively (the basis for answering the question "How should we live?"). This does not mean that it in-

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<sup>45</sup> For an elaboration of this perspective in the contemporary American context, cf. Peter Alexander Meyers, *The Position of the Citizen after September 11* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2005).

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volves partisan assertions of public policy positions. Indeed, it demands a scrupulous avoidance of the implicit preaching often found in, say, Economics departments or the academy more generally. Finally, an acknowledgment of these conditions requires a rejection of Method-oriented teaching.

This is no simple matter and comes with high professional costs. To see what such a rejection amounts to, it will be helpful to take a step back now and approach the claim about plurality in a slightly different way.

*Politics is  
constituted by  
language . . .*

Above, I also alluded to the centrality of language in political theory. This follows from, but goes beyond, the fact that language is a constitutive element in political life. Language is, so to speak, the point at which the object of inquiry and the process of inquiry must overlap. This claim is too vast to consider thoroughly here, but it might be supported, and consequences drawn from it, as follows:

*. . . as  
temporality,*

(1) Political life is made up of relations which, because they take place over time, are mainly invisible to the eye. The temporality of politics is complex and cannot be immediately appreciated by the senses; it joins “clock” time (linear and irreversible) and experiential time (periodic, grounded in repetition, and entailing historical time). Memory, dispositions, imagination, and the arrangement of material things connect past and future to the present. One may feel these connections in many ways, but relations *as such* (with their attached and various degrees of promise and responsibility) only gain the force of reality for others through language.

*. . . as  
significance,*

(2) No single statement can capture or represent with finality these relations. Rather, political language as a whole renders these relations “visible” because it is through such language that we *attribute* to actions, dispositions, institutions, and events a *specifically political significance* that they do not have by nature or in themselves.

*. . . as  
speech acts,*

(3) Thus, a crucial field of investigation for political theory is the analysis of *speech acts*. This topic may recall relatively recent researches of J. L. Austin, Kenneth Burke or Oswald Ducrot. However, the interest in *speech acts* derives from a broader rhetorical tradition, itself historically symbiotic on politics. The exegesis of texts—so prevalent in academic political theory, and performed in vastly different ways by the likes of Quentin Skinner, William

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Connolly, or Jacques Derrida—is only one type of such analysis. Analyzing the creation and mobilization of rhetorical and practical *commonplaces* is ultimately more important. However one does it, this examination of language by language presses insistently from *speech* to the *speaker*, from the *act* to the *actor*.

(4) Commonplace terms of political discourse, such as justice, power, citizen, constitution, race, gender, and all the rest are abstract terms in the sense that they are open to different applications and interpretations. They are political terms insofar as their use *ensemble* creates a space within which conflicts and agreements take shape and are acted out. This use is a function of past uses and present cultural dispositions which have their public existence in language.

... as an  
ensemble of  
commonplaces,

(5) Exhibiting and channeling the plurality of communal life, the terms of political discourse also constitute it. Every use of a *commonplace* both reproduces and transforms it. That is, it forms in the speaker and the hearer a habit; and such habits are necessary (although not sufficient) formative elements in action.

... as ethical  
plurality,

(6) In everyday language, all sorts of people use the same terms employed by the political theorist. In this respect, there is an equality between professor and student in the study of political theory. Political theory undercuts appeals to authority, the favorite professorial strategy. Instead, it forces professor and student alike to pursue persuasion. This may seem an odd claim, since political theorists turn constantly to “great books.” Yet there is a profound difference between appeals to the authority of the text and the use of a text as a centerpiece in a common search for and elaboration of extraordinarily persistent or convincing arguments. This process of persuasion at the same time exemplifies and illuminates the object under study. In discussion, student and professor shape their future use of political language; this, in turn, becomes part of the mix of everyday life as they leave the classroom. Because the process occurs in everyday language, one cannot simply “put down the book” at the end of the day. By contrast to this process, Method, as I suggested above, always turns back to its own generalized authority, thereby forcing the authority of the professor into the service of discipline.

... as  
integrative  
discussion,

(7) Paradoxically, however, political theory does not appeal to fundamental definitions or sources outside itself. It aims to develop the significance of terms of political discourse through other

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. . . as  
political  
space,

terms of the same sort, *as if* political theory was a well-defined and specialized domain. To do this one combines into constellations different terms which illuminate each other (as in the sentence “power is *legitimate* when it is *authorized* by citizens in a *constitution*”). These constellations create a distinctively political space, a space which is governed by the logic of the political and not by other sorts of circumstances (e.g. the immediate referent of single terms).

. . . as  
personal  
experience,

(8) However, these terms and constellations are not abstract in the way Method makes abstractions. It is extraordinarily rare that someone can use, for example, the term *justice* without feeling the force (small or large) of the term in the web of his or her own experience. Political terms always have their feet on the ground through the particular situation of the person who uses them. That “ground” is made up of everyday language and all the people who use it. Method, of course, is precisely an attempt to leave this “ground.”

. . . as part of  
everyday life.

(9) So, to say (7 above) that political theory does not appeal to sources outside itself is not simply the infamous hermeticism of academic disciplines. The space created by political theory is always already (an admittedly eccentric) part of everyday life by virtue of its subject matter and language.

## 12. *Valid Problems in Political Theory*

Political  
theory  
simulta-  
neously  
abstract and  
concrete.

In any field of inquiry, one of the central tasks is to give shape to the problem to be investigated. Some problems are valid and some are not. With one foot in specialized discourse and the other in everyday talk, political theory is both abstract and concrete at the same time. This duality makes the determination of valid problems different from that of the natural sciences or mathematics—where a valid problem is one in which the object can be reproduced and tested by others. While every problem is recognized as such because of our prior experience within a field of inquiry, the student of political theory confirms the validity of a problem by holding it up against the measure of his or her experience of life with other people. Now, it must be admitted that it often takes a lot of reformulation and insistence in specialized analytical terms to make a political problem appear *as such*. But the acceptance or rejection of the problem as a *valid* object of inquiry for

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political theory depends nevertheless on everyday experience. The discipline can *thematize* but not *define* the valid problems; the political world does that. Each generation of students is part of that changing world and that is why, for example, *valid* new readings of old texts keep emerging.

Reductionist strategies, which are part and parcel of Method, aim to give the subject matter greater relevance by multiplying possibilities for its application. But in the case of political theory reductionism has exactly the opposite effect. Rules or maxims in this domain are almost always trivial and arrogant. Carried from the classroom to the wider world, they make the bearer inflexible in a context where the fluid capacity for action is everything. They have the perverse effect of making problems harder to solve, rather than easier, since what makes something a political problem *for someone* is always in the particulars.

### 13. *The Difficulty and Promise in Teaching Against Method*

The Method-orientation of education is not just a matter of what professors do or the form that textbooks take. It also structures the expectations of students. “Attention deficit” is a disease of Method. While not exclusively a function of their experience in schools (television, for example, also plays a crucial role in this process), by the time students arrive in high school or college they have been shaped by educational practices which presuppose a certain understanding of what knowledge is, how to acquire it, and what counts as success in this process. The way exceptions emerge is, of course, quite complex. Nonetheless, I want to emphasize one aspect of this process here.

Guided by the instrumental ideal of Method, students expect to be *recipients of information*. This information can only be received if it is condensed and definitively ordered, that is *digestable* (the Latin *digesta* means “matters methodically arranged”). It must be *authoritative* if it is to count as knowledge at all and if it is to be considered worth acquiring. This voice of authority is *univocal* and fundamentally *static*.

*Students reduced by Method to mere “recipients of information.”*

Teaching political theory illustrates an approach that works rather directly against all of these expectations. As I have tried to show above, the necessary connection between political theory and the experience and language of the student means that stu-

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dents are constantly pressed not to “receive information” but to *actively interpret* the world around them, a world of which they are a part. This process creates a sort of confusion because there is no clear-cut distinction between what students already know and what they are learning. Faced with this confusion the student must *elaborate* the topics raised, rather than digest them. Again, no matter how obscure it may seem at any given moment, the connection of political theory to personal experience and language also provides a basis and motivation for challenges to authoritative assertions.

In this sense, political theory, like all teaching against Method, is grounded in *skepticism*. As against the claims of introspective traditions of skepticism, the skeptical elaboration of political questions concerning justice, power, equality, and so forth can never be univocal. The active interpretation of texts is a *dialectical* process; the classroom is a *dialogical* space. Unlike the static methodical emphasis on reproducing knowledge, political theory acknowledges and builds on the production of qualitatively new perspectives and standpoints which flow from skeptical dialogue. This occurs in the ongoing relationship between student and teacher.

*Training in  
plurality  
fosters  
judgment.*

It is obviously true that students rarely come up with sweeping innovations. A professor can, with the wave of a hand, subsume each reading into a digestible formula: “That’s what Kant said,” or “That was Plato’s view.” While heuristically interesting, it is a mistake to stop there. The familiarity of a student’s interpretation is all the more reason to bring forward and clarify even the most subtle differences in perspective. For—and I underscore this point again—the main task of political theory is training in plurality. Judgment, the power of citizens, is found only in the experience of plurality.

These tensions between Method and anti-Methodological discourses like political theory pose many problems for the professor. Perhaps the most challenging of these is, given many well-known difficulties, how to draw students into a productive skeptical dialogue. I will come back to this in a moment.

At the same time, the tensions I have indicated suggest a special role for political theory in the liberal arts curriculum as a whole. This includes, of course, something more or less specific to this field of inquiry: thematic material that directly investigates the broadest questions about the meaning of communal life and our place within it. However, political theory also shares with

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other anti-Methodical lines of teaching another important function. Simply by the way they raise questions, such fields stand as a challenge to the instrumental rationality that is advanced by the Method-orientation of education. They become sources of criticism which arise from a confrontation between students and the meaning of their own education. They are practical sources for the consideration of ends and the meaning of means. They push students to ask: What are the social consequences of engineering? What is the relation between economic efficiency and freedom? How does “virtual reality” transform my relations to other human beings? and so forth.

#### ***14. The Practical Function of Skepticism***

Every day an honest professor asks himself: What do I really know? Is what I am saying true? Has the object of my knowledge changed since yesterday? Has the world changed since I learned what I am saying?

To be a professor begins with an attraction to truth and a concern for transmissibility. One without the other is not enough. True claims that cannot be conveyed are literally meaningless. Likewise, nonsense passed from hand to hand is still nonsense. The art of the professor is to weave together these two affinities, one to *episteme* and the other to *praxis*.

Even taken together truth *and* transmissibility are not definitive of the practice of teaching. To be a teacher requires a radically critical orientation towards one’s own activity. This would be immobilizing for most other professions. Yet self-criticism is the fundamental principle of motion for the teacher. Skepticism still takes the place of faith. So, while all “professing” may be described as a dialectic of knowledge and practice, for the teacher it is a critical orientation to the activity of professing itself which gives the special productive character to what he or she does. The skepticism which shapes and joins together the true and the transmissible is what puts both at the service of the central project of education, viz. the construction of the student’s freedom.

*Construction of student’s freedom the central project of education.*

To this point I have only spoken about the teacher. A vast range of different commitments, from a market orientation that follows “consumer sovereignty” to an ideal of “democratic education,” inclines us to give conceptual priority to the student. The inclination is misleading here. In the matter of cultivating a productive

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skepticism it is the teacher who comes first. It is his or her *metier* that is at stake.

There is an obvious sense in which the teacher comes first. The teacher is at the place of learning when the student arrives and when he or she leaves, the teacher's engagement with the material always precedes in time that of the student, etc. But the teacher has priority in a less obvious sense as well: no one teaches without leading. Even if, to instill confidence and a sense of engagement in the student, the teacher stands only slightly ahead, there he or she must stand.

I emphasize the priority of the teacher because the element of skepticism which, ultimately, insures that teaching assists in the construction of the student's freedom does not have its foundation in the direct collaboration of teacher and student. Collaborative activities have the important functions of building common dispositions, language, and a sense of community. But unless the skeptical element comes to the foreground, these functions of collaboration work against, rather than in favor, of freedom. They produce conformism.

Skepticism, like faith, is a practical inclination and a solitary construction. This does not mean it emerges without context; witness Vaclav Havel's account in "The Power of the Powerless" of how, under conditions of modern "technological ideology," skepticism can gain a practical political force. But no one can force you to be skeptical. The extension of skepticism from an impulse into a broadly informed fabric of understanding and intellectual disposition begins as a largely personal process in which data from the world are actively mediated through imagination and memory. The intensity and difficulty of this process is witnessed by the general eccentricity ('out-of-the-loop-ness') and occasional idiocy (Greek - *idion* = to be alone) of professors.

So skepticism, this crucial aspect of the teacher/student relation, emerges within and gains its force from the character of the teacher. If the teacher's teacher-like character is not formed before he comes together with the student, he cannot lead with just that quality least natural, but most important, to democratic leadership: skepticism.

When we turn to the relation between student and teacher, it is important to distinguish between learning and teaching. The capacity to learn is arguably the only universal feature of human na-

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ture. Learning is an adjustment a person makes to satisfy the need for a kind of propriety or fitness. If by accident or design one comes across a better way to meet a need,<sup>46</sup> one takes this up and thus learns. This process involves a dialectical relation between persons and things. It is possible to learn from another person with whom one has no interaction, but this occurs in cases where that other person stands across from you like a thing (e.g. watching a great basketball player) or an authority (e.g. silently following commands).

Teaching, by contrast, is essentially an interactive relation between at least two persons. No teacher simply conveys information; that is, perhaps, something cave paintings and computers can do. The essential element in teaching is this: to suggest and exemplify ways of learning. Since learning is a matter of self-correction, it should not be surprising that a student almost never learns in the precise moment of contact with the professor. There may come moments of epiphany, pain, or pleasure; but one learns *from* these as after-effects.

*Teacher's role to suggest and exemplify ways of learning.*

What the student gains from the teaching relation are ways of treating things. These patterns of engaging things (which include for example bits of language, movements, instruments, chemicals, etc.) are adopted through mimesis and deliberate repetition. The student imitates the teacher who has developed through experience ways of treating the relevant things. Teaching sets up relatively controlled conditions in which this process can go forward. But, in public, where the student can imitate, the teacher almost always stops short of the goal. How often do students observe *the discovery* and the deliberate process of applying a discovery to one's own understanding as a corrective of error? Yet that is what they must learn to do. And at the crucial moment they are left without a guide.

These ways of treating things are essentially a matter of character. While the most general sense of "character" is touched by what I am saying, I want to underscore that the point here has little to do with whether the teacher is "nice" or "friendly" or "sullen." I am using the word in a much narrower and two-sided way. By "character" I mean, on the one hand, the bundle of dispositions a person has which take shape from the fit between the person and the material in question. On the other hand, "character"

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<sup>46</sup> This is true whether the need is positive or negative from an external point of view.

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is the person's capacity to act out that fitness, to make the parts of the world go together in a sensible way.

The student learns almost nothing directly from being told what to do. He or she gathers an orientation by imitating what the teacher does. Do not, however, imagine that this means that the student simply reproduces what the teacher does; since imitation is an active human process, the orientation to the material at hand will always turn out differently. Imitation is prerequisite, but the student *learns* only by acting according to that orientation. If one looks only at the propositional content of what the teacher says, one sees only the *telling what to do*. The teacher's *teaching* is found in his dispositions towards the material. That is why character is the central concern in teaching. The art in teaching is to make one's appropriate dispositions appear before others and make them, therefore, appropriable.

In this sense, it is *by learning something himself* that the teacher best teaches. The banal but important observation that teachers learn from their students is not the point here. I mean that if the teacher can, in the public setting of the classroom rather than the private setting of the study, learn something about the material at hand, and make this process visible for imitation by students, then he has really done his job. This is, of course, an extremely difficult thing to do. It requires an extraordinary engagement with the matter at hand. It forces the professor to concentrate on exacting, small points where discoveries are more likely, but to do so without boring his students to death. It rarely succeeds. But the Method-orientation of teaching rules out this approach altogether.

*Character  
the central  
mechanism  
of teaching.*

To identify character as the central mechanism of teaching is to identify, at the same time, a grave danger which is inherent in the teaching process itself. If the teaching relation depends on character, charisma will often enter into it. This tendency jeopardizes the central project of education, viz. the construction of the student's freedom. This is why I said above that an honest teacher maintains his skepticism with the greatest vigilance, and turns it continuously against himself. Both teacher and preacher may be charismatic, but only the latter makes it an instrument of his purposes.

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