

# The Truth About Liberal Arts

*by Matt Waggoner*

**“Better to illuminate than merely to shine.”**

**Thomas Aquinas**

**A**s we go to bat for the soul of liberal arts education, we run the risk of forgetting what we’re fighting for. Skills, jobs, and even self-enrichment were not historically regarded as the ultimate goals of the liberal arts. They were byproducts. The reason it was called “liberal” in the first place by early adopters like Seneca was because it was supposed to cultivate a free human being.<sup>1</sup> Education on the liberal model aimed to liberate.

Try searching for references to freedom in contemporary college or university mission statements. Even at democratically enlightened campuses such as the University of California, Santa Cruz—born out of the ferment of the 1960s with student-designed curricula—you’ll see references to social responsibility, innovation, and transforming paradigms, but they’re squeamish when it comes to mentioning freedom and liberation. These are loaded terms that seem uncouth in today’s educational public square, which is odd. From Socrates to the 18th century democratic revolutions, freedom was understood as the open-minded pursuit of truth. To be free meant being at liberty to examine the presuppositions of self and society, interrogating contradictions and independently arriving at conclusions without having to rely on the guidance of authority figures or social norms. Freedom’s orientation was truth seeking, not job or happiness seeking. It wasn’t a path to the successful or well-adjusted life, because rather than accommodating oneself to the world its ultimate objective was to ruthlessly examine and relentlessly question the world. When Martin Luther

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King, Jr. self-identified with the Socratic legacy, it wasn't because he thought it would guarantee him job security and personal serenity. The point of that kind of learning was to unsettle you, leaving you *less* adjusted to the world. I can accept an ability to navigate the world as a practical necessity, but becoming well adjusted to it is giving up too much.

The liberal arts should embrace its roots instead of denying what's most valuable about it: the free pursuit of truth. My own institution's mission statement comes close to what I consider getting it right: Liberal education here is known as a "search for truth in all its dimensions." An idea with medieval roots, truth ranks

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just below freedom in today's list of hardest-to-find mission statement references. It had to do with wedding faith with reason, but in everyday practice it gave those who were curious a green light to employ rational and empirical methods to understand themselves and their world without having to fret over heresy charges. Beyond religiously affiliated institutions you hardly ever see it anymore. That's because "truth" is a relic. It has become best practice for colleges and universities to refer to things like service, excellence, leadership, and rankings, instead of risking suspicion that your institution missed last century's epistemological boat by failing to realize that hardly anybody talks about truth in earnest anymore.

Even in philosophy, which was partly responsible for putting it to rest, it's not actually true that truth remains a dead concept. But before considering truth's afterlife, it's helpful to consider the origins of two other concerns that dominate our liberal arts landscape. The burning question on many people's minds has become whether learning should be instrumental or not. Are we teaching skills or self-enlargement? In ancient Greek terms, are we after *techne* (τέχνη) or *episteme* (ἐπιστήμη), interested or disinterested knowledge? The first kind isn't concerned with eternal truths or principled ethics so much as craft and skill. The second kind treats knowledge like a personal quest. Somewhere down the line we collectively agreed that one or the other of these should be salient, but why? Why does today's liberal education debate concentrate on skills and self-enlargement while ignoring truth and freedom? An obvious answer is dollars and cents. In a world in which how-to and self-help books outsell everything else, higher ed marketing follows suit. But I suspect the causes run deeper than that. Current fixations with self-enlargement and a very narrowly defined form of critical thinking are the rippling effects of intellectual trends that flourished in the early and middle 20th century.

## TRUTH IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The first of these two intellectual trends was existentialism, which attempted to come to terms with 19th century challenges to the concept of truth. If need be, Nietzsche's "God is dead" can serve as a convenient signpost for those challenges, as long as we bear in mind that Nietzsche saw himself as merely the messenger of something that had happened in modern culture and a protagonist for honest (and yes, joyful) confrontation with its consequences. Instead of wallowing in despair, existentialists reframed the nihilistic threat as an optimistic occasion. The absence of truth became both an opportunity as well as a responsibility to transform mean-

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ingless existence into something subjectively meaningful. You could either live in a state of bad faith by pretending everything rests on traditional assurances, or you could live authentically by mapping yourself onto grids of self-made meaning. The fact that such meanings don't inhere in an absurd existence means that you'll have to craft your own values. "Existence precedes essence," Sartre concluded. The choices we make about how to live determine the kinds of people we become.<sup>2</sup>

Existentialism's rival school was logical positivism, a proof-based philosophy that held that every verifiable position could only be confirmed empirically or logically. It's often overlooked that logical positivism shared existentialism's nihilistic starting point. The so-called unanswerable questions that perennially vexed philosophy—God, causation, truth, freedom—were meaningless questions. It wasn't that they were false in the sense that you couldn't empirically verify them. Linguistically speaking, the questions themselves didn't mean anything. They were literally *nonsense*. When logical positivists talked about truths, they were talking about that which could be derived from observable measures of validity and utility. Because so-called laws and moral truths are culturally authorized conventions for judging and acting, it isn't a question of what is true about them, but of describing how claims made on their behalf function in the terrain of public statements.

Existentialism and positivism lodged a heart/brain splinter deep in the liberal education psyche. One of them turned truth into a meaning-making mandate (a.k.a. self-creation, self-fulfillment, self-enlargement), while the other one reduced it to the practical assessment of statements and knowable facts (in today's terminology, critical thinking). The fashionableness of these two movements has waned, but they haven't disappeared. Logical positivism endures as insular styles of analytic philosophy and lines of elegantly crafted computer engineering code. Existentialism's residues float around the pop-culture zeitgeist as phrases and

acronyms like *carpe diem*, #YOLO, and life is a journey not a destination. And yet their influence continues to set the agenda for the debate about liberal education's purpose. Freedom and the now-defunct search for truth, which were for centuries inextricably bound to one another, have schizophrenically morphed into two distinct higher-ed personalities. Pragmatic, clear-cut notions about critical thinking vie for class time and institutional dollars with fuzzier notions about constructing worlds of meaning and living authentically.

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LIBERAL EDUCATION AND POVERTY

If we want to salvage the soul of liberal arts education, I recommend taking a second look at the untimely concept of truth. Truth, for one thing, isn't reducible to something we can positivistically verify. It isn't simply what "works," because the world as it exists doesn't exhaust what can be said to be true. The way I'm thinking about truth begins with Plato's Socrates, who didn't pursue truth by excelling at competence in the world's knowledge but by exposing its contradictions. Plato's ontology, his notion of truths as timeless and immaterial Forms, is rejected today by most. It was eroded by 17th and 18th century empiricism, 19th century utilitarianism, and 20th century pragmatism, existentialism, and positivism, until it was nearly laid to rest by postmodernism. But not quite. Repudiating any kind of truth whatsoever hasn't been the last word, ironically not even in the most obscure strains of avant-garde theoretical humanities. There are many examples to which we could point,<sup>3</sup> but French philosopher Alain Badiou has done more than probably anyone to recover something still valuable in the Platonic universe of ideas about truth.

At times Badiou's language sounds like a throwback to Plato's metaphysics. At other times, he immerses himself in logic and set theory. His decision not to confine himself to just one of philosophy's common languages, and not even just to philosophy proper, stems from his desire to think beyond the conclusions about truth that have become commonplace. Here's how he defines truth: a moment of rupture within existing laws of being and appearance, or within what we might call the way of the world. What's crucial about this definition is the idea that "truths exist as exceptions to what there is."<sup>4</sup> He calls those disruptive moments *events*, and he argues that the act of witnessing truth's events is what it means to become a subject. Being a subject is never sociologically or biologically guaranteed. It isn't

reducible to “bodies or languages,” which is to say to simply being an individual or a member of a community. A *subject* is more than identity. You become one by being faithful to an event of truth when it’s been glimpsed, and by announcing it as an event in the world. When subjects faithfully announce events of truth in the world, they produce genuine knowledge, which is more than just what is known, real, or existent.

Experimenting with the application of Badiou’s approach to today’s debates around the value of a liberal arts education yields interesting insights, because liberal ed has become an education in bodies and languages in at least two ways. For

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one, it has become an exercise in teaching students the skills needed to navigate worlds of objective knowledge (bodies) and the systems, mechanisms, and procedures within which those bodies of knowledge function (languages). Students are taught how to traverse such things as markets, technology, jobs, policies, information, literacy codes, money, products, knowledge procedures, patterns, statistics, communication systems, institutions, services, data—in other words, all the various components and clusters comprising the world as we know it, and the codes that organize them into more or less smooth-functioning processes. For another, students are taught the ethos of what Badiou calls the “democratic materialism” of bodies and languages: recognizing the multiplicity of identities, perspectives, and experiences, and the stance of tolerance that has come to define successful enlargement in liberal education. It sees a world comprised of individuals with rights attached to communities of equally valuable differences. The underlying logic of democratic materialism, whether of the skills-type or the enlargement-type, is relativism, which is once again the legacy that positivism and existentialism bequeathed us.

What’s wrong with that? It isn’t that it’s wrong, just inadequate. There are indeed bodies and languages that students should encounter, know, engage, and tolerate, “except that there are also truths.”<sup>5</sup> What does it mean to say that truth exceeds knowledge? For many of us in the liberal arts, it means the goal of liberal learning goes beyond knowing what’s out there, how it functions and how to function within it. The liberal learner is searching for truths that aren’t always compatible with known procedures and the realities they administer on a daily basis. I would also argue that liberal learning doesn’t reach its satisfactory conclusion in an accommodating disposition that avoids judgment by default. Acquiring an expanded horizon isn’t simply about acknowledging the plurality of bodies and

languages. It's also about considering what's true about the plethora. It's positing claims and making judgments that have to do with what's infinite amid the finite flux of details and distinctions encountered in daily life.

#### TRUTH AS AN EVENT

The best way to illustrate this is to think about what it looks like in the classroom. Here, for example, is what I mean when I say to ethics students that we're going to search for truth in all its dimensions by thinking about world poverty. Students first become acquainted with the facts—with how the world really is.

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They learn that 44 percent of the world's population lives below the poverty line and consumes less than two percent of the world's resources, and that 18 million people die each year from preventable poverty-related causes. At the same time, they learn that the world's richest countries account for less than 20 percent of the world's total population but consume 81 percent of its resources, and that just one percent of that 81 percent would tip the scale by lifting the world's poor above the poverty line, potentially saving in the neighborhood of 18 million lives yearly.<sup>6</sup> That's *what there is*.

Students often respond by asserting more of what there is. There is also human nature, they'll say, which many understand as a timeless truth, even if they claim they don't believe in timeless truths. Human nature serves as a handy rationale for why world poverty exists, why it will continue to exist, and why it has to exist. Besides, there's also capitalism. They've come to believe that capitalism is like human nature—that it *does, will, and has* to exist in pretty much the same forms we know it today. These forms not only cannot, but should not offer ultimate solutions to world poverty. Existing forms of capitalism shouldn't even try to offer solutions, some students conjecture, because that would contradict human nature.<sup>7</sup> According to the law of rational self-interest, nations should take care of themselves, not one another. Even if nations were by some freak of nature to become inclined to take care of others more than they currently do, then according to capitalism's laws of appearance and being this would be tantamount to enabling bad behavior, making things worse not better. You come to expect truisms about teaching a man to fish and the inevitable lifeboat analogy.

Students will often go on to assert that *what there is* isn't even exhausted by the laws of human nature and capitalism. There's also overpopulation, scarcity, local government corruption, climate, cultural maladaptiveness, laziness, and the

like. So they learn more about what there is. They learn that overpopulation isn't the true culprit for those 18 million yearly deaths, because food scarcity is a myth. The world wastes or loses more than a third of the food it produces each year, or close to what would be needed to bring an end to global deaths from starvation.<sup>8</sup> They learn that most of today's poor nations weren't always poor—it wasn't until modern times when they began losing their traditional livelihoods that they began losing so many lives to hunger. They learn that the map of today's global poor corresponds almost exactly to the map of yesterday's colonized. And that First World administered debt and development programs produce at least as much poverty as

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they reduce, while reaping profits from the tariff and subsidy policies they enforce on so-called developing countries but don't uniformly enforce on themselves.

Students eventually wade through theoretical debates about whether charity is what ethicists call a "perfect" duty, or whether it's just a meritorious way of earning moral brownie points. They grapple with whether charity or structural changes to the global economy should be considered the primary moral duty, and with whether a person's moral duties extend only to fellow countrymen or whether it's possible that geographic distance and nation-state borders could have nothing whatsoever to do with moral duties. They weigh the merits of suffering versus citizenship as logical starting points for ethical responsibility. They evaluate common sense moral principles like having a duty to help if you can and repairing the harms for which you're responsible.

Immersed in knowledge about what there is, you'll occasionally have a student voice a disruptive truth. It'll be a comment that isn't intended as an eventful intervention into classroom discourse, but that's what it is. "So basically," the student will say as though thinking aloud to herself, "we're kind of choosing to let 18 million people die every year even though we could easily stop it from happening, which if you think about it is almost like being an accomplice to murder, to *mass* murder." Other students will be uncomfortable with that and they'll want to massage the wording of the claim. Something tells them that words such as "choose" and "murder" can't possibly apply in this case. Nothing in the world validates the application of these words to the realities of global poverty. There's almost no precedent in mainstream conversation to support the idea that the global poor die because the global rich let them die, or that by the logic of any other context this would be something like negligent genocide. Your thoughtful student has stum-

bled onto a thought almost by accident, and here's how we should think about it: Truth has emerged as an exception to what there is. It has emerged as an exception to accepted knowledge about human nature, an exception to accepted knowledge about how the world works, and as an exception to how we're supposed to perceive and process the relevant information. What has emerged is an event, a rupture in thinking and knowledge in the form of a question about what's, in fact, "true."

The problem is that students aren't accustomed to thinking about truths that contradict what's real and realistic given currently existing arrangements. They're not used to the idea that what is real in the world might be false, and that what's

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true might be what's currently nonexistent, unobserved, or unverified. That's because we've trained them to equate truth with reality and with what's known. We've trained them to respond to dilemmas in one of two ways: first, by using "critical thinking skills" to come up with pragmatic solutions inside the constraints of existing frameworks, discourses, and procedures, and second, by internalizing problems as self-creating "narratives" that have to do with things like sympathy, awareness, accountability, fate, human nature, rational self-interest, optimism, pessimism, making sense of things beyond our control, making meaning out of a hopelessly absurd existence, or what have you. Such is the lingering impact of positivism and existentialism in the form of so-called "critical thinking" and "self-enlargement."

#### OPEN THOUGHT

The search for truth in all its dimensions should clear the way for open thought, which means it shouldn't be shackled to what there is. It should open the way to thinking that whatever the limiting conditions and factors, a world in which 18 million people unnecessarily die each year is a deeply untrue world. You're thinking, this is asking students to think in counterfactuals, and what's the use in that? How can you sell it if it doesn't have real-world impact? Open thought, I'm arguing, isn't trying to be useful, but it's also not some abstract fiction even when it falls on the side of the nonexistent. Open thought opens the world to possibilities that have been denied by closed systems, closed procedures, and closed languages. While truth might be unreal and unrealistic right now, its realization depends on the willingness of subjects/students to announce, name, and enunciate truth events, and to be faithful to what currently seems groundless or absurd. None of which has a chance of happening as long as the search for truth is reduced to "thinking critically" about what's empirically and observably *there*, or when it's

reduced to the narcissistic act of subjectively digesting the world's problems within the private cosmoses of our own paths to self-enlargement.

While I'm cautious about the way existentialism has been handed down and watered down, I'm sympathetic with Sartre's dictum. Existence preceding essence means we're free to make choices as individuals, as societies, and as educators about how to live, and those free decisions create new natures, new realities, new truths. Critical thinking and self-enlargement are valuable tools and byproducts of a liberal arts education, but they can (and in today's climate I think *do*) serve a purpose that's difficult to describe in any other way than ideological. By teaching students how to function within and become well adjusted to a world beyond which it is assumed there are no other possibilities, education isn't acting as a source of liberation. It's acting as a source of legitimation.

But the historic mission of the liberal arts was to be a resource for challenging the idea that things are what they are and can't be any different. In 1953, drawing inspiration from Thomas More's *Utopia*, Maynard Hutchins argued that the true purpose of liberal education is to promote intellectual development and philosophical diversity.<sup>9</sup> The promise of a liberal education was that when the search for truth is independent of utility, authority, and self evidence, when it's free to seek truths that the world's course doesn't validate, then those who seek truth are truly free. By downgrading truth and sidelining it to the more marketable goals of how-to and self-help, we might indeed extend the life of the liberal arts by another decade or two, but absent the centrality of truth and freedom it isn't going to be a life worth living. 

## ENDNOTES

1. Seneca's epistle on "liberal and vocational studies" does not score points for gender-neutral language (despite the fact that Roman girls were not excluded), but it is crystal clear about liberal learning's ultimate aims: "You see why 'liberal studies' are so called; it is because they are studies worthy of a free-born gentleman. But there is only one really liberal study, that which gives a man his liberty. It is the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave, and great-souled." Seneca, *Moral Epistles*.
2. Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism," in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, pp. 17-72.
3. For example, Adorno, "Truth-content is the task of critique," or, Derrida: "The value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings." Slavoj Žižek is the most vehement among contemporary philosophers about the poor state of truth today. Here is Žižek taking stock in *Repeating Lenin*: "We live in the 'postmodern' era in which truth-claims as such are dismissed as an expression of hidden power-mechanisms—as the reborn pseudo-Neitzscheans like to emphasize, truth is a lie which is most efficient in asserting our will to power. The very question, apropos of some statement, 'Is it true?' is supplanted by the question, 'Under what power conditions can this statement be uttered?' What we get instead of the universal truth is the multitude of perspectives, or, as it is fashionable to put it today, of 'narratives'—not only literature, but also politics, religion, science, they are all different narratives, stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves, and the ultimate goal of ethics is to guarantee the neutral space in which this multitude of narratives can peacefully coexist, in which everyone, from ethnic to sexual minorities, will have the right and possibility to tell his story."
4. Badiou, "Bodies, Languages, Truths."
5. *Ibid.*

6. Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights*.
7. This, by the way, is an argument that essence precedes existence, or that human nature determines what kind of lives we can lead, which Sartre was opposing when he concluded the opposite, that existence precedes essence.
8. United Nations, *2013 Food and Agriculture Organization Report*.
9. Hutchins, *University of Utopia*.

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