

PERSPECTIVES AND IMPERATIVES

DIMENSIONALISM: THE MISSING ELEMENT IN AMERICAN SCHOOLING

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The great American vice is not materialism but a lack of respect for matter

—W. H. Auden

The question was insistent. What is wrong with American education? As I visited hundreds of classes ranging from kindergarten through the second year of college, the question repeated itself: What is wrong? Why is space-cadet writing almost universal among college freshmen? Why are self-doubt and loneliness almost endemic among sophomores? What is wrong?

In professional literature I found that my disquiet was widely shared, but the explanations of what was amiss seemed needlessly extended, abstract, and vague. I felt that the defect in our system could be identified in a single paragraph and described in a single article.

The basic flaw in American education, I have come to believe, is its lack of *dimensionalism*. Dimensionalism is the sense of being at home in the world, the conviction that man lives in a cosmos rather than a chaos, the consciousness that the dimensional order of earth, sea, and sky constitute a meaningful pattern of which man is a meaningful part. Presupposing a harmony between man and his material context, dimensionalism is marked by a strong preference of the affirmative over the negative, of the extroverted over the introverted, of the concrete over the abstract.

Dimensionalism, I submit, was the core element around which the Hellenes shaped the first Western school program, a program of astonishing power and effectiveness. For the Hellenes the development of such a curriculum was a requirement for survival. They made up a small tribe inhabiting a small, arid peninsula with an area about one-sixtieth that of the United States. To the east loomed the Persian Empire—vast, populous, rich, powerful. Sooner or later, as the Hellenes realized, the Persian despots would move to invade their land and to overwhelm them. If they were to survive, they must have a training program of extraordinary power and of such superlative quality that it would enable one Hellene to overmatch several Persians.

The first demand of such a program would be to instill in each Hellenic youth an adamant sense of self. Through such legends as that of Narcissus, the Hellenic youth was taught to look outward to the world around him, to what the Hellene called the "physis," the visible, tangible, *dimensioned* order of olive groves, stars, mountains, sunrise, brooks, and surf. His world-view

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was one steeped in affirmation and awe for the universe. "Wonder," declared a callous-handed stonemason named Socrates, "is the beginning of wisdom," a stance reiterated in Aristotle's espousal of "the indescribable marvel of reality."

The Hellenic youth required little logic to perceive the next step: if the physical universe is good and unfolds toward good, then he is good and is predisposed toward good. Moreover, the process of maximizing the good within him—the process of self-realization—depended largely upon a program of close interaction with the visible, tangible, dimensioned order. The legend of Antaeus, whose strength redoubled with each contact with material reality, was a reminder of his need for close interaction with that reality. His model was Odysseus of Ithaca, sea-grimed, sun-bronzed, muscular, callous-handed, a man who could plow a furrow, craft a bedstead, hunt a stag, cook a meal, forge a tool, build a raft, set course by the stars.

In a companion epic, the *Iliad*, the growing boy would meet with further evidence of the Greek rapport with dimensioned reality. "Dear to us ever," sings Homer, "is the banquet and the harp and the dance and changes of raiment and the warm bath and love and sleep." In the drama of Sophocles, a general as well as a playwright, the youth would find dimensionalism exalted above verbalism: "The glory of life lies not in words but in deeds."

The same grounded, positive stance that predisposed the Greek youth to see his world and himself as good predisposed him to see his fellow earthlings as good. The visible, dimensioned triad of earth, sea, and sky not only undergirded the self-assurance of Euthypro and Glaucon but gave them a framework in which to interrelate and to cooperate. In the field they had marched together, wheeled in formation together, together they had carried rocks to reinforce the walls of their city. On the sea they swam in the same surf (the Greek boy who could not swim was regarded as a dunce), hauled on the same halyard, or pulled on the same oar. In *The Clouds* of Aristophanes we can glimpse the camaraderie and hardiness developed by such training. A group of Athenian schoolboys en route to class happen to meet on the street; they move "in well drilled ranks, by the right in threes, and never a cloak between them, even if the snow was coming down in bucketfuls."

The effort of Hellenic schoolmen to develop a school program that would engender supra-human performance was first tested at Marathon in 490 B.C. There, on a coastal plain 26 miles from Athens, a small force of 10,000 Hellenes drew themselves into formation, into a tiny imitation of the order they assumed in the universe at large. Carefully maintaining its pattern, the small Athenian army drove forward into a milling host of 60,000 Persians, threw them into further confusion, and won a stunning victory. Ten years later in a naval engagement off Salamis, the Hellenes, again outnumbered but again fighting in orderly array, won another victory.

Herodotus gives two reasons for this triumph: the inability of the Persians to impose order upon their large fleet and the fact that when thousands of combatants were thrown into the water, the Persian youths drowned but the

Greek boys swam ashore. But it is the Hellenic commander's remark as he watched the remnants of the enemy armada fleeing eastward that should hold most interest for American educators, "It is not we who have done this."

Themistocles meant that the Hellenes had discovered a method of generating supra-human performance. By assuming a positive stance toward the dimensioned order around them and by studying that order both intently and extensively, they had discerned in it an awesome pattern. By aligning their development and their effort with the lines of that pattern, they had found that they could with small numbers exert great power. In brief, they found that dimensionalism led to dynamism.

In virtually every field of human endeavor—in geography, seamanship, astronomy, geometry, science, architecture, sculpture, government, literature, and philosophy—this small tribe repeated the triumphs of Marathon and Salamis. In studying the Greek achievement we would do well to focus upon two facets of the Greek character: self-assurance and camaraderie. Both traits grew out of a single matrix. We have already seen that the self-esteem of the Hellenic youth was rooted in a sense of rapport with dimensioned reality—with sunrise, ripening wheat, mountain, wind, wave, and star. Because he linked his own meaning with that of the wonder-touched universe, the Hellenic youth gained a degree of self-confidence that opened to him levels of supra-human performance. But given that meagerness of Greek numbers and Greek resources, supra-human performance on an individualistic basis would have availed little against the dangers of the ancient world. The Greek achievement demanded an extraordinary degree of communality as well as an extraordinary degree of ability. Not only Marathon and Salamis but the Parthenon, the first democracy, the voyage of Pythias, Greek medicine, physics, and science, Euclid's *Geometry*, and Ptolemy's *Geographia* were triumphs of cooperation.

The program that engendered these triumphs, keyed to a positive presupposition of man's place in the cosmos, was one steeped in affirmation. E. V. Rieu points out in his preface to the *Iliad* that to Homer, "Good is more real than evil." In the *Odyssey* the Greek youth was meeting with the success story of a hero who overcame many obstacles to reach his goal: reunion with wife and son at his home in Ithaca. In the tragedies, to be sure, the Greek youth witnessed dark moments, but he could not fail to note that the flaw that led to disaster lay not in the universe but in Oedipus or Creon. Walking away in the sunlight from the hillside on which the drama had been enacted, he must have felt that the cosmic order had been affirmed rather than impugned.

Moreover, his insight into the play's meaning would not have been shaken by his witness of any violent scenes. The Greeks knew very well that violence is a part of life, but they saw no compelling reason for making it a part of their curriculum. In the works of both Herodotus and Plato, the positive angle of vision is unmistakable. As Hamilton reminds us of the father of history—

He was the first sight-seer in the world, and there has never been a happier one. If he

could see something new, discomforts and dangers were nothing to him. He seems never to have noticed them. He never wrote about them. He filled his books with the marvels to rejoice a man's heart—marvels of which the great earth was full. Oh, wonder that there were such goodly creatures in it!¹

And of Plato, Hamilton writes: "Plato was at his most Greek when he said that to describe the ugliness and weakness of men was to give only the appearance, not the truth, and that men's supreme duty was to trace out the examples—the forms—of excellence, which would enable them to choose the right pattern for their lives."² In the process of growing up the Greek youth, no doubt, would encounter meanness, ugliness, and squalor, but he would no more expect to find them in his school program than he would expect to see gargoyles on the pillars of the Parthenon.

Taught to look *outside* himself, to see the visible, tangible, dimensioned order in which he lived as good, predisposed to see himself as good and his fellow earthlings as good, the Hellenic youth developed the self-confidence and the sociability that made possible the Greek achievement, one that was, in the last analysis, a triumph of teaching.

The failure to convey to our youth a precious part of their cultural heritage, the sense of being at home in the world, is, I believe, the supreme failure of our system of education. Its other failures—alcoholism, drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, teenage suicides, absenteeism, poor discipline, poor reading, and poor writing—relate directly or indirectly to this basic flaw (e.g., if students do not value themselves, they will not value their aspirations, ideas, or opinions highly enough to express them with clarity or force).

Although today's students do not read much, one novel, significantly, that most of them are familiar with is *The Catcher in the Rye*. Decade after decade, they relate to Holden Caulfield because they sense that the nihilism and loneliness that distress Holden are the same forces that distress them. One scene in the story should be especially significant to them. Spiraling downward to a nervous collapse that will place him in an institution, Holden is:

... walking and walking up Fifth Avenue, without any tie or anything. Then all of a sudden, something very spooky started happening. Every time I came to the end of a block and stepped off the goddam curb, I had this feeling that I'd never get to the other side of the street. I thought I'd just go down, down, down, and nobody'd ever see me again.³

What terrifies Holden—and thousands of teenagers like him—is indeed terrifying: the fear that he is surrounded by an immense void in which his life has no meaning. His misgivings are deeper, more disturbing, than doubts

¹Edith Hamilton, *The Greek Way* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1942), pp. 163–164.

²Edith Hamilton, *The Echo of Greece* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1957), p. 169.

³J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), pp. 197–198.

about his self-worth, they are doubts about the reality of the world around him, doubts about the reality of his own being. In his desperate need for some reassurance that he exists, that he is a being to whom others respond, he plunges now and then into a telephone booth before he realizes that there isn't anyone he intended to call.

When Holden appears at the apartment of a former English teacher, he is received with kindness. Mr. Antolini is a good human being, intelligent, compassionate, quick to sense the boy's distress, but his effort to help ends in futility. Trained in a program only a little less vacuous and verbalistic than that which has failed to sustain Holden, Antolini, as the empty cocktail glasses around the apartment suggest, has never been able to solve the problem that anguishes Holden, the problem of identity. But he does the best he can. On a piece of paper he writes a sentence from a psychoanalyst: "The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of a mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one."⁴ Syntactically, the sentence is admirable—simple, clear, and balanced, but in content it is abstract, general, and sterile. To a boy hungry for reassurance about his existence, it is little more than a gracefully shaped dollop of verbal meringue.

If teachers are to improve upon the performance of well-intentioned but ineffective Mr. Antolini in countering the sense of nothingness and loneliness that blight the lives of countless teenagers, they have no need to launch massive studies or undertake costly research projects. The problem of providing youth with a matrix that will nurture their sense of self-worth and their ability to interrelate was faced and solved 25 centuries before they were born, when the first Western schoolmen built a high-performance curriculum upon the assumption that the dimensioned order in which man lives is good and unfolds toward good.

That program was extroverted, coherent, concrete, powerful, and enduring. When medieval education sickened and languished from a surfeit of verbalism, it was chiefly Hellenic dimensionalism that rescued it from a miasma of allegory, symbolism, and logic-chopping and sent through Europe that surge of dynamism we know as the Renaissance. Of the recovered classic texts, by far the most consequential was Ptolemy's *Geographia*, which inspired the great voyages that gave Europe, in size little more than a promontory off Asia, 500 years of world domination.

If we are to have an American Renaissance, if we are to send real power surging through our feeble curriculum, we must realign it with the primal insight at the core of Western culture. If we are to redeem our youth from vacuity, if we are to rescue our schools from the miasma of archverbalism that now enshrouds them, we must recover the clear, coherent vision that framed the first Western curriculum. And to regain that vision we must forsake the misty realm of social, political, economic, psychological, and linguistic

⁴Ibid., p. 188.

theory in which we are groping, and reorient our purview to the three basics that undergird reading, writing, and arithmetic: earth, sea, and sky

To be sure, educational theory has been—and should continue to be—a major resource to educators. But a controlling vision levitated into an empyrean of abstract theory is not serving us well. Our tradition tells us that we are not archverbalists but archdimensionalists. If we are to meet the current demand for stronger teaching we must repatriate our professional dialogue in the *physis*, in what a superb teacher called “the indescribable marvel of reality.”

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