

# *The Elements of Discord: The Sine Qua Non of Education*

Gregory Kerr

Thus the chief task of education is above all to shape man, or to guide the evolving dynamism through which man forms himself as a man. . . . [E]ducation needs primarily to know what man is. . . . Man is a person who holds himself in hand by his intelligence and his will. . . . A person possesses absolute dignity because he is in direct relationship with the realm of being, truth, goodness, and beauty. . . .

Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*<sup>1</sup>

The moment one touches a transcendental, one touches being itself. . . . It is remarkable that men really communicate with one another only by passing through being or one of its properties.

Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*<sup>2</sup>

In the face of multiculturalism and widespread relativism, this paper will argue, along with Allan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind*, that for educators to be effective, they cannot espouse a relativism. Rather they must, among other things, examine, explore and provoke their students to explore the principles underlying human discourse and discord and make them explicit so that their students will know and communicate more effectively and thereby become more authentically human.

Inspired by ideas of Maritain on the transcendentals, Bernard Lonergan

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1943), pp. 1, 5: 7–8.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism and The Frontiers of Poetry*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1974), p. 32.

on cognitional method,<sup>3</sup> C.S. Lewis on the moral law<sup>4</sup> and Allan Bloom on education,<sup>5</sup> we will attempt to explore some of those principles that underlie human discourse and even human disagreement, thereby disclosing the very conditions of possibility for any ideology or criticism of one. Even the most avid critic of traditional Western education can be shown to be using transcendental notions of unity, truth, goodness and beauty. If education is about criticism at all, then we need the transcendentals and all that they imply about human nature.

To put it concretely, if we are criticized by an extremely politically correct, multicultural feminist who claims that we are hypocritical, biased, androcentric, imposers of ideology and offensive, we might respond by saying that if we are really hypocritical, then it must mean that we are not consistent (i.e., have integrity or unity). If we are biased, then it must mean that we are *not* seeing the whole truth of reality and *ought* to be. If we impose our ideologies, then we are doing something we ought not to be doing and this implies that humans ought to seek, know, and freely will the good as well as allow others to do so. Finally, if we are criticized for being offensive, we presume that we appear ugly in some way and that we are faulted for that. Now we do not wish to start by criticizing the postmodern attitude *per se*. No; actually we wish for the present purpose to agree with them. We want to consider for a moment that perhaps we are biased and narrow-minded. The real question is, "What then is our obligation?" Critics think that the traditional educator has an obligation to take their advice. But if they are even partly right, whence comes this obligation?

I had a startling experience recently. I was teaching an argument that I had adapted from an introductory philosophy text.<sup>6</sup> The argument was in-

<sup>3</sup> Lonergan presents many criticisms of modernity by relying upon what he calls "cognitional method" in his book, *Insight*. The problem with most philosophical problems is that the philosophers do not take into account the very conditions of possibility for the origin of their theories, i.e., their own acts of insight, understanding and judgment. See *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958).

<sup>4</sup> See C. S. Lewis's powerful argument for a natural lawgiver in *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1952).

<sup>5</sup> Allan Bloom makes a powerful critique of relativism and how it closes the minds of students in *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), pp. 25–43.

<sup>6</sup> David Stewart and H. Gene Blocker, *Fundamentals of Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1992), p. 107.

spired by Plato and it argued for the existence of immaterial things. I summarized the argument as follows:

If the physical world were all that there is, then our moral judgments  
would not be based upon anything.  
If our moral judgments were not based upon anything, then they would  
be meaningless.  
But our moral judgments are meaningful.  
Therefore, they must be based upon something.  
Therefore, the physical world is not all there is.

The basic move is to accept moral judgments as the primary datum and then to argue about what reality must be like in order to make sense of them.

When I had finished, the students responded by saying, in effect, "Well, this argument is androcentric!" What they meant was that because Plato was coming from a certain point of view, namely that of a male, that somehow undermined the argument. Now rather than taking issue with "androcentric," I forwarded the argument to include their objection and I asked them, "But is it wrong to be androcentric?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Then what accounts for the idea that we ought not to be androcentric, that we should not see things from merely our own point of view, either as male or female, but try to be open and embrace other viewpoints?"

I think some of the students in that class came to see that they could not both embrace the thoroughgoing relativism of postmodernism and still make the kind of moral judgments they were making and eagerly desired to make.

Postmodernists today want to say that some viewpoints are oppressive and therefore wrong; but what meaning can "wrong" have in their vocabulary? What could it mean other than they do not like the exercise of power of certain people and they would like to have more of it themselves or that they just feel bad about the arguments against them?

## II

We propose here to give a sketch of a philosophy of education based upon the principles of Jacques Maritain. Of course, we will not be doing what Maritain has done so well in *Education at the Crossroads*, but we shall outline what we take to be some of the central tenets of education and argue that these are basic to any education and the failure to recognize them does not mean that they will not be taught, but will be taught badly and without proper *prise de conscience* due to them. For if one does not

take the time to study and explore his philosophy, it does not mean that he does not have one, only that he has an unexamined and "biased" one. So too, if one does not examine the implicit underpinnings of one's education, it is not that he will not have any knowledge, but that it will be fragmentary and underdeveloped.

Recently, a colleague said to me that every time one's computer re-saves a file on the hard disk it saves it in a different position on that disk, so that the same basic file appears on different areas on that disk. He also told me that there are certain programs one can purchase that will join like files together on the disk. I think that many of our human philosophies have within them views and opinions that are perceptive but scattered, and we do not always check to see if they align or go together. For example, we all have students who will tell us, in one and the same breath, that they believe that God exists but also that, "who's to really say whether God exists or not?"<sup>7</sup> Of course, they continue, "it all depends upon your belief." Such people are, in my opinion, people who do not have their "files" or thoughts together. And, of course, the examination of these problems is precisely one of the major functions of philosophy. What we ask here is "What are the fundamental principles of a sound education?" We believe we can answer this question by examining the basic principles or attributes that a good "paper" or "position" ought to have.

Any paper is a bad paper if it presents views that undermine its own claim to reasonably present a position or theory.<sup>8</sup> Some papers contain certain positions which undermine any attempt to justify those positions. In short, these writers cut off the very branch they are sitting on.

Now, in the presentation of any theory or paper, certain things are implicitly assumed and affirmed even if explicitly they are denied. There are certain properties—if we can call them that—of a position or theory that *have* to be there. They are the necessary conditions of any "possible" theory.

<sup>7</sup> Norman Melchert has recently created a provocative dialogue on this question of relativism, exploring all the various issues, entitled *Who's to Say? A Dialogue on Relativism* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994).

<sup>8</sup> This argument is similar to that of C. S. Lewis in his "The Cardinal Difficulty of Naturalism" in *Miracles* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1960). If we may improvise a bit, it runs thus: (1) No belief that is caused by non-rational mechanisms alone is a belief that is reasonable to accept; (2) All theories that hold that the universe began by a big bang accident are theories that are caused by non-rational mechanisms alone; Therefore, no theories that hold that the universe began by a big bang accident alone are reasonable to accept.

No one disputes that in the college or university setting that students should and do present papers and positions on topics. When a student gives an instructor a paper, he or she expects that the instructor will evaluate that paper. Now, assuming that the instructor is not a dictator or one who merely gives A's to those who fully agree with him, B's to those who partly agree with him and so forth, but actually grades the papers upon something other than his or her philosophical vision, we might just ask what does he grade them on? If he admires the Socratic method, he will not merely "teach" or impart theories to the student and expect him to regurgitate them, but rather will be concerned with the student's development of their own abilities to reason, to know and to appreciate. As any instructor knows, merely imparting theories short-circuits the learning process. But what properties should a paper have?

We argue that a good paper must: a) present a representation of reality, facts that correspond to the way things are; b) be clear about the values it is exploring and defending; c) have a unity and avoid internal contradictions; and d) have a beauty—not merely regurgitate the same old truths or values all over again but come with a new perspective and fresh insight.

These criteria, well-known as the transcendentals, are according to St. Thomas and Maritain, the property of every real being. We would claim that they are also the property of a good paper and thus a sound education. We argue for this by examining what papers would look like if they violated these transcendental properties at will. We propose some *reductio ad absurdum* arguments to show that no one can communicate without these for long. According to Maritain, it is precisely through the transcendentals that we can communicate at all.

Take the transcendental of the good. For instance, suppose a paper were to claim that nothing is really good or that good and evil are only by-products of our minds, culture, time, or "will to power." If that were the case, it would be hard to figure out why the paper should be written at all. Why do people write essays explaining their point if to hear their point is not any better—in a real sense—than not to hear it? It is like saying that even though my theory has no real value to it, you should listen to it anyway.

The paper may make a stronger relativistic claim. It may claim that those who believe in objective values will necessarily force or impose their view upon others or, at the very least, be arrogant or foolish. For, as the argument runs, if you really think that you know absolute values—or, as some would claim, make any value distinctions at all—you would be inclined to insist that everyone agree with you.

In response, we might say that if we should not impose my view upon

another and that this is really wrong, then there is real wrong. You have claimed that we have broken some rule. If we have broken some rule, then some rule exists that neither you nor I have made. You may be right that I should not be intolerant but you have cut off any reasonable way to argue for that.<sup>9</sup>

A second response would be to assert that if I believe in objective values or a moral law, then I believe that humans are moral beings and that they can only be moral by freely knowing and choosing what is good. Now, if I know that this is the case, how can I but realize that to impose my view precisely undermines the very same view.<sup>10</sup>

But once *any* value is asserted as a real and objective good, it behooves educators to help students to ascertain the parameters of that good so that we and the students may be able to draw the line between genuine tolerance and apathy. We need to learn the meaning and the limits of tolerance and how this good relates to other goods. We should learn how tolerance is a real moral principle and how it is not simply a matter of personal ideology or preference of Western, well-educated males.

The second property is truth. It may be claimed by a paper that the knowledge of all of reality is a matter of interpretation, that all truths are simply expressions of particular culture or are bound by language, and that no one can really say what is ultimately real. But here again it is a position that undermines the possibility of writing a paper of any value. Every paper assumes a set metaphysic. It presumes that the items it talks about are, at least for the moment "real." It must assume something is real! As Chesterton has put it in a similar point about evolution:

If evolution simply means that a positive thing called an ape turned very slowly into a positive thing called a man, then it is stingless for the most orthodox; a personal God might just as well do things slowly as quickly, especially if, like the Christian God, he were outside time. But if it means anything more, it means that there is no such thing as an ape to change, and no such thing as a man for him to change into. It means that there is no such thing as a thing. At best there is only one thing, and that is a flux of everything and anything. This is an attack not upon faith, but upon the mind; you cannot think if there are no things to think about.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Bloom argues a similar point about prejudice in *The Closing of the American Mind*, p. 35.

<sup>10</sup> This is very similar to a major point of John Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955) New York: Image, 1959), pp. 34-35.

Even practically speaking, no paper can be skeptical here. For one must know certain things to be true in order to doubt other things. Everything cannot be up for grabs! For if this were the case, then one's world view would be like the confused grey image on a television set on the wrong channel. Further, if this were true, then I could write that Derrida really is a neo-platonist and Marx a covert capitalist and might be legitimate in saying so. It might be alright to say that there were no such things as slaves, mass murders, racism, dominance of one group of people over another. Furthermore, what would be the meaning of a "group of people"? If truth is relative to culture, who determines what constitutes a culture? May I not make my own? You may suppose that all views of truth are but the expression of the will to power, but then must not the "will to power" be a real reality? Nietzsche certainly talks about power, life, decadence as if they are "real" things and not his own interpretations. No, even for Nietzsche there is objective truth, the drive of life, and not even he would want us to dispute that. Sometimes I wonder, if the views of postmodern relativists were totally true, how we could possibly misrepresent them? After all, their views are external to us and beyond our subjective consciousness.

The third property of a good paper is unity. While unity concerns many things, what is perhaps the most important is what falls within the domain of logic. One can criticize any paper that is incoherent, a paper where a student flatly contradicts himself or has theories whose implications do so. We would rate poorly a paper that claimed that postmodernism was the best philosophy to live by because it helped us live up to our nature as human beings. Yet there are those who criticize logic. In a very provocative article by Barry Barnes and David Bloor entitled "Relativism, Rationalism, and the Sociology of Knowledge,"<sup>12</sup> the authors make a powerful argument concluding that:

Logic, as it is systematized in textbooks, monography or research papers, is a learned body of scholarly lore, growing and varying over time. It is a mass of conventional routines, decisions, expedient restrictions, dicta, maxims, and ad hoc rules. The sheer lack of necessity in granting its assumptions or adopting its strange and elaborate definitions is the point that should strike any candid observer.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Barry Barnes and David Bloor, "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, eds., *Rationality and Relativism*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1982), pp. 21-47.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

My reaction to the article puzzled me. I was very impressed by the authors' arguments against the universal cogency of logic. If ever there was a well-supported and well-reasoned argument, it was here. And I was all prepared to believe them except for one thing. They informed me that there really was no such thing as an objectively good argument. They were only using their social conventions to persuade me to their side. They had created a brilliant argument only to show me that there were no such things as brilliant arguments. They had proved to me that there was no such thing as proofs. Later on, I wondered why they should not want to invent a logic all their own! After all, some techniques of persuasion are more effective than others. Are the authors bound by any rules? Is there any obligation or reason for the readers to listen to someone if they think reason is simply a matter of cultural or personal preference? Well, I do like listening to the preferences and tastes of others. Indeed, much of what I do know and appreciate in the fine arts has come from such suggestions. I can imagine a man saying that everything is a matter of taste, but a man certainly cannot argue that. If he does he is lying. His actions say that I am obliged to assent to his reasoning and at the same time that no form of reasoning should oblige me.

The last area is, perhaps the most difficult to explore and that is the domain of beauty. Just as all things are one, true, good, they are also beautiful. A good paper should not simply reiterate the truths and values that have been said before in the same way. We expect or hope the student to present his or her own opinion or angle on the truth and values above. If Maritain and St. Thomas were right in stating that clarity, proportion and integrity are criteria of beauty, might we not expect these attributes in papers as well? Might we not expect the papers to have clarity or to shed light on some issue? Might we not expect the ideas treated in the paper to be proportionate or well-balanced, to have treated other sides of the issue, especially opposing ones? Might we not expect the paper to have integrity and to have every issue covered that needs to be covered within the scope determined by the thesis and not to leave any relevant questions unanswered? Beauty has been defined by Maritain as the "radiance of all the transcendentals united"<sup>14</sup> Thus, if a student has found new ways to creatively han-

<sup>14</sup> Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 173 n. 66; "A vrai dire il est la splendeur de tous les transcendants réunis" (*Art et Scholastique*, p. 225, n. 66). The phrase first appears in the footnotes of *Art et Scholastique* in the second edition of 1927. Paris: L. Rouart. May we suggest at this point the significance of "réunir"? According to Cassell's *French and English Dictionary*, the primary meaning is "to reunite." The beautiful brings the transcendentals back together. It is interesting that Cornelia N.

dle ideas that are true and valuable, then we might say that his paper is "beautiful."

In addition, we think it is not enough that students state a position that is true, good and beautiful, they should also give arguments why it is. Unless their paper states what everyone already knows to be true and valuable, they need to state the reasons why they are so. It may even be claimed that they should be able to trace their truths or values back to their first reasons or principles.

If we have been at all accurate thus far, what we have just shown is that for any theory to do well, it must rely upon assumptions of unity, truth, goodness and beauty. If these notions, as well as the realities seen through them are important, then instructors are obliged to provoke student insight in how to evaluate and explore these regions of human inquiry for themselves. In short, the instructor should try to help the student to see the things that are true, grasp the things that are good and beautiful, and understand the reasons behind these.

### III

Now if the transcendentals are, in some manner, the property of good papers, they are what we as educators wish to inspire and elicit from our students. We want them to produce theories that are one, true, good and beautiful.

Are we imposing on them when we do so? No. Just as we have shown that the transcendentals are *naturally* the properties of a good paper, and insofar as all humans desire to communicate themselves—whether in papers or, for that matter in any other form—to others and insofar as they desire to do it well, it is natural and indeed liberating to educate in this way.

So if a human is a being who, to communicate himself, must rely upon the transcendentals, we can be sure that they are of his own human nature. If an instructor elicits a movement on the part of the student, it is precisely upon the tracks or roads of his own human nature. Human nature, as Norris Clarke, Gilson, Lonergan and Maritain have shown time and time again, aspires along the lines of the transcendentals—and we claim by three dif-

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Borgerhoff, who worked with Maritain on *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* and *The Responsibility of the Artist*, translates the same phrase as the "splendor of all transcendentals gathered together," in *An Introduction to the Basic Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1990), p. 69. Cf. *Neuf leçons sur les notions premières de la philosophie morale* (Paris: Pierre Téqui, 1960), p. 63.

ferent means: towards the true and the understanding of the real which includes himself as knower, towards the good and the fulfillment of his own nature and this includes notions of his liberty and responsibility, and towards the beautiful and that valuable intelligibility of things not yet comprehensible but which is a reflection of the gift of existence that runs through all things.

Maritain lays special emphasis upon the last drive.<sup>15</sup> He does so because it underlies all of the other drives. Beauty is that which is the first to invade the preconscious root of the human spirit to ignite and inspire it to form all of its products, whether theoretical concepts or moral actions. A teacher must protect and encourage that.

Educators want to provoke growth in human beings, to make them better. They wish to provoke insights in students to help them first to understand and to judge what is truly real and to evaluate their own "maps" of reality; second, to understand what is truly good and that which will make them more responsible and free; and third, to appreciate the beautiful and to help them penetrate the surfaces of things and discover that "there is more in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in their philosophies."

In short, when an educator does this, he does not impose his biases upon students, but rather provides an opportunity for the students to become more themselves, and, as a result, become better judges of reality, and better judges of values, including the value of tolerance. Finally, a motto may come to mind. "Give a man a fish and you have fed him for a day, teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." We want to teach him how to "know" truth, goodness and beauty simply and feed him for an eternity.

<sup>15</sup> Maritain, *Education at the Crossroads*, pp. 42-44; 52; 61.