



2016

Liberal Education: Transmitting Knowledge Through Texts

Molly Brigid McGrath
Assumption College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.assumption.edu/philosophy-faculty>



Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Flynn, Molly Brigid. "Liberal Education: Transmitting Knowledge Through Texts." *Memory, Invention, and Delivery: Transmitting and Transforming Knowledge and Culture in Liberal Arts Education for the Future: Selected Proceedings from the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Association for Core Texts and Courses, Memphis, Tennessee, April 17-19, 2009*. Edited by Richard Dagger, Christopher Metress, and J. Scott Lee. University Press of America, 2016, pp. 49-54.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy Department at Digital Commons @ Assumption University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Department Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Assumption University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@assumption.edu.

Liberal Education: Transmitting Knowledge through Texts

*Molly Brigid Flynn
Assumption College*

The theme of this year's conference invites us to reflect on the use of texts in transmitting knowledge from the past and shaping culture for the future. Liberal education, it seems, aims to do this, and uses texts to do so. This theme runs counter to today's typical explanation of liberal education, which exalts "critical thinking" or "thinking for oneself." Such slogans only tangentially connect to the vocation of the human intellect. An adequate justification for liberal education must honor something to which our thinking should submit, something taboo: truth. But when a teacher aims to communicate truth, he or she seems to undermine the liberalness of education. This appearance results from a misunderstanding.

Thinking for oneself is often falsely imaged as an individualistic and critical move, a stand against authorities, traditions, and community. This implies, absurdly, that education and thinking well are enemies. Education is done by others to perfect our skills; to transmit knowledge; to shape our habits; to unify, continue, and improve our culture. Were intellectual freedom to *consist* in sloughing off tradition and community, "liberal education" would be not merely paradoxical but incoherent. Thus, the mere coherence of the idea of liberal education is important.

The idea claims that education true to our personhood liberates us by freeing the mind and frees the mind by cultivating our ability to submit ourselves to truth. It suggests that the human's freedom to form his or her own judgments well needs nourishment from others. This suggestion, however paradoxical, makes sense with what we know about the person. The human mind is not solitary but social, not silent but conversational; reason is not a native reflex or self-executing program, but requires pruning and watering. Liberal education uses texts and teachers to share knowledge

and shape culture, convinced not only that the integrity of the human person can bear it, but that the fulfillment of the person requires it.

The question arises, however, whether texts can *transmit* knowledge at all. We need to remember a point at least as old as the *Meno*. Plato's *Meno* suggests that knowledge is teachable but not transmissible. In any transmission of knowledge, mere opinion is received; I may receive the report, but lack the experience needed to make it knowledge. Turning that opinion into knowledge, Socrates suggests, requires reasoning about causes, which is like tying down a runaway slave. The dialogue's myth of recollection suggests the same thing. Some learning involves no transmission-reception. The knowledge is discovered by the learner, guided by a teacher. Since the unschooled slave boy eventually gets the correct answer to the math problem, the slave-boy experiment is supposed to "prove" that the soul comes into life with knowledge built-in. One flaw in Socrates' experiment, however, is that the boy fishes out lots of falsehood from his soul before happening upon the right answer. A necessary truth that is "recollected," like information that is received, is not yet knowledge. It needs to be reasoned through and understood.

Great texts are something like civilization's memory, but memories cannot be just handed around. Socrates reminds us in the *Meno* that it is not enough to recall something that we have once understood: knowledge requires repeating the insight. The new student encounters a text expressing civilization's knowledge. But reasoning and understanding need always to be performed again, if the "transmission" isn't going to run out of the soul. Civilization's treasures are precarious, and our great texts can teach and civilize only when each generation reappropriates the inheritance.

"Transmission" is a metaphor likely to increase our desire for knowledge packaged as information, and likely to heighten our impatience for the less information-friendly disciplines, like the humanities, philosophy, and theology. The knowledge they offer us has a peculiar depth that eludes our full grasp.

The truths contemplated by the humanities have shells that are easily picked up and passed around without being quite understood. These texts only intimate their humane truths by representing events of life, imbuing these events with a style and form that help us grasp life's structure and that shape our imagination. They help us return to life more insightfully. Formation by these civilizing "transmissions" is nothing like reading a newspaper. Buying the information-transmission paradigm will lead us to neglect these humane truths or reduce them to slogans.

A reflection by Edmund Husserl on philosophical knowledge can help us find a better metaphor than transmission. Though he focuses on philosophy, the moral of the story extends to liberal education generally. In a famous manifesto—the 1910 essay "Philosophy as a Rigorous Science"—Husserl attacks naturalism, psychologism, and historicism in order to defend humans as capable of achieving real truth. These isms use knowledge of their own domains to, implicitly or explicitly, deny that we are capable of universally valid knowledge. Husserl attacks them as countersensical. The essay defends the human striving for knowledge against these sophistic attacks on reason. (If we wish to defend the use of texts as a way of sharing knowledge at all, we should start by insightfully rejecting these isms.)

In the essay, Husserl also offers a description of the "rigorous science" of his

philosophical aspirations. First, it deals with essential necessities, not with mere facts of existence. Second, he is looking for a "doctrinal system" worked up by a "community of investigators" whose discoveries become a public possession, a "treasure trove" permanently bequeathed to later generations (287, 283). While there is a need for "worldview philosophy" to address the profound unknowns of human existence (283-86), philosophy properly understood is science, replacing apparent profundity with clarity wherever it can. It also replaces personal teachers with reportable results. He insists, "Science is impersonal" (292). He scoffs at Kant's saying that one cannot learn philosophy but only how to philosophize: "What is that if not an admission of the unscientific character of philosophy?" (250). We get the impression from this essay that philosophy should produce textbooks reporting impersonal results.

Husserl followed up on this article twenty-five years later in a few pages of notes—conversing with his past self, you might say, in the context of the developments in himself and the philosophical community since 1910. Here is the old man's opening lamentation: "Philosophy as science. as serious, rigorous ... science—the dream is over" (389).

Attention to Husserl's reflections shows that he is not (as commonly reported) taking back his dedication to the project of philosophy as universally valid knowledge. He is lamenting the continental *Zeitgeist* demanding from philosophy existential profundity and a worldview as "a sort of personal religious faith" (390). Husserl also rejects the adequacy of philosophy practiced as piece-by-piece problem-solving analysis. He urges a return to our philosophical history to reinvigorate philosophy in our times. But he is not advocating historical scholarship. Returning to texts from philosophy's past does not mean doing a history of ideas. We read philosophical history philosophically only when we take it up personally and allow it to motivate our own philosophical searching. (Let's broaden the point: We learn from great texts liberally only when we allow them to motivate our own searching for truth.)

"Philosophy," he says, has always existed only as a *project* on its way toward "philosophy" in the strong sense, a system of universally valid truths (390-91). This is the "problematic *telos* of philosophy," problematic because we must aim for universally valid knowledge, but must be unsatisfied with whatever knowledge there is to be found in the tradition or in our own investigations (394). And so, for every genuine philosopher, philosophy must be an "enigma" (394).

We grasp our project of philosophy by immersing ourselves in the tradition, and this requires understanding the tradition as a project—*rather than as static, transmitted doctrine*. The most important part of this tradition, our greatest inheritance, is not the results of past philosophers, but the project itself, and its *telos* or task, which we take on in becoming philosophical. When I read past philosophers philosophically, Husserl says, they are part of my living present; they draw me into conversation, and Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant become my coworkers.

Has Husserl here abandoned his earlier dedication to philosophy as a science? Earlier, science consisted in knowledge in the form of transmittable impersonal doctrine. He now says, "history is not before us like a warehouse containing its assembled wares, such that everyone can convince himself of the existence of these wares as being not dreamed-up, not illusory" (392-93). There is no simple "transmission"

of philosophical insight, but not because there is no success and not because real thought requires an individualistic renunciation of inheritance. The communications we receive from others we receive from our own "standpoint," and so they are only as good as we allow them to be, as motivators for our own philosophizing (393). Real insight, universally valid knowledge, is attained, though it may not be recognized by others and cannot be simply handed over to another. The tradition shares its secrets, its successes, its knowledge only by sharing its project, by drawing us into conversation with our coworkers.

Does this mean that Husserl now agrees with Kant that "one cannot learn philosophy, but only how to philosophize"? Perhaps, though that could not mean that the goal is to just 'think for oneself' or design one's own worldview. Philosophizing must mean attaining to universally valid insight. Rather, perhaps now Husserl sees a circle: one must immerse oneself in philosophy to learn how to philosophize, and one must learn how to philosophize in order to learn from any philosophy philosophically. The later Husserl seems to accept that sharing knowledge in philosophy is not quite as easy as transmitting conclusions in the mathematical and empirical sciences, and that conversation with real texts are essential to this task. Conversation, I suggest, is a better metaphor than transmission for learning from texts in a liberal education.

In an interesting contradiction to the Husserl of 1910, Michael Oakeshott *praises* philosophy *because* "There is no body of philosophical 'knowledge' to become detached from the activity of philosophizing," and this makes philosophy "unusually conversable" (492). I agree with Oakeshott. But this is not, I insist with Husserl, because philosophers achieve no knowledge; it is because the understanding won in philosophical conversations cannot be merely reported. Understanding the discovery requires going through the discovering.

Husserl here is commenting on philosophy, but the point should be broadened to liberal education generally. We certainly must not deny that liberal education is an education: knowledge is to be had and a liberal education communicates it. At the same time, the knowledge to be got in liberal education can be gotten only liberally.

To draw some conclusions, I would like to spell out two distinctions that will help us see how texts might act in a liberal education to share knowledge and shape culture. First, texts suitable to a liberal education are not textbooks or encyclopedias, which report conclusions as basically settled and verified. These conclusions seem to be public domain and are presented impersonally, in an anonymous voice. We often introduce academic disciplines through textbooks, and don't mind a bit of feigned certainty so we can transmit some settled conclusions. The ideal of knowledge suggested by textbooks is one of information. Information is settled and verified, is detachable from its discoverer, and is understandable even by those who have not gone through the process of discovery. FDA-approved and ready for common consumption, digestible information-bits are suitable for presentation in textbooks and encyclopedias. Exactly because it is trusted, flat, and so easily understandable, information does not invite contemplation or reflection, and seems to feed easily into uses beyond understanding. The key texts of a liberal education are not like this. They may provide lots of information, but they are not about providing information.

Second, a liberal education's texts are not merely historical documents, though this is how they first appear to the student raised on information. Why read an out-of-date textbook, except for curiosity about how we have gotten where we are? Our texts appear to the textbook-bred student to be antiquarian curiosities, relics. A relic (whether a text, artifact, or opinion) has its place in a past series of transformations. It emerged from a certain history that shaped it, and then it sank away into a future that it may have shaped, that absconds with its relevance, and that it survives only as a corpse. When we view a relic historically, we place it in the series of transformations, and we allow it to evoke nostalgia, awe, or arrogance for how it was shaped, how it has shaped, and how it has been outgrown. For pedagogical reasons, when teaching about the past we sometimes present relics and not just the conclusions they corroborate. Our knowledge gains a surer footing, the imagination and memory are more aroused, the understanding more concrete when handling evidence rather than receiving reports.

Old texts can serve as historical documents, but that isn't what a text suitable for liberal education is. Insofar as a text expresses out-of-date information or atavistic moral standards taboo to our times, we are likely to dismiss it as a relic. We risk being led astray here about liberal education's texts by two false paradigms: the first is the model that sees all knowledge as information, and the second is its partner paradigm, the model that sees education as information-transfer and training for the skillful acquisition of results. In the artificial light of these assumptions, every old work, every book yellowing and well thumbed by ages past, looks like a dated encyclopedia.

The contrast with textbooks and relics suggests a crucial feature of a liberal education's texts: they draw us into conversation. They must be conversable. Textbooks are not conversable. They give us many claims with which we can start humane conversations, but they do not invite us to converse *with them*. Texts read as relics are also not conversable. When our attitude pigeonholes the text as a relic, we shut up our ears to its voice, psychoanalyzing away anything it has to say as merely an expression of its era.

A text read liberally shares knowledge, but only by shaping us as conversation partners. This image of conversation is the one suggested by Husserl's mature reflections of philosophy as a science. It is also the image expounded by Michael Oakshott. According to Oakshott, our greatest inheritance as human beings is not "an accumulating body of information," but a conversation "begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries" (490). Liberal education's "places of learning" are special reserves of time and space and people where this conversation is allowed to play free of many work-a-day requirements, and universities induct their students into this conversation in a special way using great texts from the great human traditions. To want to reduce the course of this conversation to the information that can be gleaned from it would push out the voices that can't just report results and would reduce our inheritance to an heirloom. This is the context that draws the truth out of the slogans about thinking critically and for oneself. We must endow this heritage to future generations as a project and not as a museum.

Works Cited

- Husserl, Edmund. "Philosophy as Rigorous Science." Trans. Marcus Brainard. *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* 2 (2002), 249-295.
- . "Denial of Scientific Philosophy. Necessity of Reflection. The Reflection [Must Be] Historical. How Is History Required?" In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Trans. David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1970: 389-396.
- Oakeshott, Michael. "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind." In *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991: 488-541.
- Plato. *Meno*. Trans. George Anastaplo. Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2003.