Between Truth and Falsity

Liberal Education and the Arts of Discernment

Edited by

Karim Dharamsi
Mount Royal University, Canada
and
David Ohreen
Mount Royal University, Canada

Series in Education

VERNON PRESS

www.vernonpress.com

In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200
Wilmington, Delaware, 19801
United States

In the rest of the world:
Vernon Press
C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Education

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020950202

ISBN: 978-1-62273-937-0

Cover design by Vernon Press. Cover photo by Drew Graham on Unsplash.

This volume is dedicated to the hard work of Dr James Zimmer, former Vice President and Vice Provost of Teaching and Learning at Mount Royal University and Dr Terry Chapman, former Vice President Academic of Medicine Hat College in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

On May 3-5, 2018, we held our fourth liberal education conference in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Held at the Calgary Westin Downtown, this collection of papers is selected from those delivered at the conference. A joint committee of dedicated faculty form Mount Royal University and Medicine Hate College helped to organize the meeting. We would like to thank Diane Bennett, Sean Carleton, Marty Clark, Elizabeth Evans, Cynthia Gallop, Mark Gardiner, Charles Helper, Navneet Kumar, Rob Platts, Brenda Quantz, and Archie Maclean. We extend a special thanks to James (Jim) Zimmer and Terry Chapman, colleagues to whom we have dedicated this volume. Of course, we thank the many authors and our anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback—and Bruce Umbaugh for his foreword to this volume. Finally, we thank Vernon Press for their commitment and support of our work in liberal education.

Foreword

Bruce Umbaugh
Webster University
President of the Association of General and Liberal Studies

The essays collected here address a range of issues about higher education in general, liberal education in particular, and contemporary concerns about expertise, truth, propaganda, and illiberal disdain for the difference between truth and falsehood. They are timely and at once foundational and applied.

Some of these essays take up views of the role of higher education: is it a private good that allows students to accumulate a kind of capital? Is it a public good intended to benefit the citizenry broadly? Is it something else or more?

Students attend universities for many reasons, but especially for credentials to land 'good jobs' and for social mobility. Universities, though, promise in addition that we will offer a 'liberal education' that gives students more than a degree.

A liberal education is the education of free people. It is also a *liberating* education—an education that frees people. Liberal education prepares people for meaningful participation in democracy and for leading flourishing lives.

Several essays take up liberal education in relation to being able to distinguish among truth, made up 'news,' and bullshit offered without regard for whether it is true or false. In Plato's *Meno*, Socrates and Meno agree that true opinions are useful—just as useful as real knowledge—but Socrates insists that knowledge is the more valuable of the two. Socrates offers a metaphor to illustrate the difference between genuine knowledge and mere belief that happens to be true. Mere opinion, he says, is like the statues of Daedalus that were said to be incredibly lifelike—so much so that they would run away if not tied down. Knowledge is such a statue tied down by the ability to give a justification for it.

Here is a place for liberal education. Liberal education frees people to think for themselves, to seek out and to evaluate information, to reason ethically about alternatives, and to advance justifications. It helps people to make themselves knowers and not mere opinion-havers and thereby to enhance democratic processes and practices as a citizen.

As the volume documents, these skills are in obvious demand today. Consider, for example, all-too-common media representations of blackness. As one essay discusses, such representations have served racial oppression over

centuries. This and other examples of pressing challenges we face in the 21st century—including a viral pandemic, global climate change, and movements such as #metoo and #blacklivesmatter—call on us to interpret, reason, and act together. Moreover, each of these problems and associated movements has behind it deep, professional expertise. As individuals, we cannot know all of it, but liberal education prepares us to make sense of it as needed. To do that, we must discern truth and falsity, likely and unlikely, cogent and incoherent—and do so in awareness of our own limitations and biases.

Liberal education is good for democratic society at large, and liberal education is good for the economic well-being of individuals. More than that, it helps people live genuinely good and flourishing lives.

Dave Pollard has suggested that a flourishing life involves work that a person loves, does well, and that makes a positive difference in the world. Liberal education assists students with all three of those. [1] By addressing breadth of learning, liberal education helps students find things they love. In developing knowledge and skills, it helps them be effective at what they undertake to do. Liberal education informs one's understanding of how the world works and improves ethical reasoning abilities to help people make choices that improve the world. In these ways, universities' liberal education programs prepare our students to live rich, meaningful, flourishing lives.

Finally, some essays here address pedagogy, relationships, and collaboration. I have argued elsewhere that the best pedagogies depend on something like ethics of care.[2] Ethics of care focus not on abstract principles, but on relationships between persons and on meeting the particular needs of—in the pedagogical case—actual students. In one formulation, we recognize a need for care, take responsibility to meet that need, do the work of meeting it, and evaluate how well the care provided met the caring need.[3] A wealth of literature documents practices that are now well understood to improve student learning, agency, and well-being.[4] All of them require that instructors identify

---

[1] Dave Pollard, *Finding the Sweet Spot: The Natural Entrepreneur's Guide to Responsible, Sustainable Joyful Work* (White River Junction Vt.: Chelsea Green, 2008).

[2] Bruce Umbaugh "The Imperative of Care Over Contract," Association of American College and Universities Annual Meeting. Washington, D.C., 2020; Bruce Umbaugh, "Care for Students to Build Democratic Citizenship," Orlando, Florida: Association of General and Liberal Studies, 2019.

[3] Joan Tronto, "Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose," *Ethics and Social Welfare* 4 (2) (2010): 158–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2010.484259.

[4] See, for example, George Kuh, "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter," Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008, https://www.aacu.org/node/4084; Mary-Ann Winkelmes, David E.

students' needs and act in their interests—hallmarks of care ethics. Thinking about this in the context of the present volume, I recognize that care, too, depends on discernment, for if we are mistaken about students' needs and interests, then we will make poor and potentially destructive choices in our relationships with them. It's discernment all the way down.

The papers collected in this volume address the urgent imperative to think outside partisan identity or prejudice, to discern and utilize genuine expertise, and to draw on the disciplines, methods, and pedagogies of liberal education. They make clear that liberal education is of both private and public benefit. It improves students' economic prospects—a private good— as it also prepares them for citizenship. By cultivating discernment, it makes flourishing lives more readily attainable. Liberal education enhances both agency and caring, and so prepares one not just to be a worker (as students expect), or even a citizen (as governments might desire), but to be full persons who can understand and collaborate with diverse other persons to improve the world. It is easy to discern the value in all that.

References

Kuh, George. "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter," *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, September 30, 2008, https://www.aacu.org/node/4084.

Pascarella, Blaich. "Lessons from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education." *Change (New Rochelle, N.Y.)* 45, no. 2 (March 1, 2013): 6–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2013.764257.

Pollard, Dave. *Finding the Sweet Spot: The Natural Entrepreneur's Guide to Responsible, Sustainable Joyful Work*. White River Junction Vt.: Chelsea Green, 2009.

Tronto, Joan. "Creating Caring Institutions: Politics, Plurality, and Purpose." Ethics and Social Welfare 4, no. 2 (July 1, 2010): 158–71. https:// doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2010.484259.

Umbaugh, Bruce. "The Imperative of Care Over Contract." *Association of American College and Universities Annual Meeting*. Washington, D.C., 2020.

Umbaugh, Bruce. "Care for Students to Build Democratic Citizenship." Orlando, Florida: *Association of General and Liberal Studies*, 2019.

Copeland, Ed Jorgensen, Alison Sloat, Anna Smedley, Peter Pizor, Katharine Johnson, and Sharon Jalene, "Benefits (Some Unexpected) of Transparently Designed Assignments." *The National Teaching & Learning Forum*, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1002/ntlf.30029; Ernest Pascarella, and Charles Blaich, "Lessons from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 2013, https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2013.764257.

Winkelmes, Copeland. “Benefits (some Unexpected) of Transparently Designed Assignments.” *The National Teaching & Learning Forum 24*, no. 4 (May 2015): 4–7. https://doi.org/10.1002/ntlf.30029.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Karim Dharamsi
Mount Royal University
and
David Ohreen
Mount Royal University

I

Perhaps our curiosity began with the first flickers of conscious awareness. We might well have come to recognize early in our natural history the world as being independent of our thoughts and that our unfettered desires may be thwarted by an uncooperative mind-independent order. In our coming of age with our capacities for language and symbol use, we likely came to understand other minds as having their own *independent* inner-lives—and that *potentially* the world for another person may well be conceptualized differently, that what they named and how it figured in their view of the world might be distinctively their own. Perhaps a confederation of interests and ontological commitments seemed less a challenge between those we recognized as part of our community, while, conversely, we came to understand the sometimes seemingly insurmountable challenges presented by the 'stranger', the 'outsider', *perhaps even the 'intruder.'*

From our first encounters with those unlike our compatriots, rational agents subject to different norms, we might have come to understand that our world is not shared—that our assumptions about the universalizability of our beliefs may well be naïve. Perhaps more importantly, we may have come to understand well that those we are now encountering may work on a similar epistemic assumption, namely, that their beliefs are universalizable, that differences are ultimately superficial. Our hopes for intersubjective agreement, objectivity, and *truth*—comprehensive ideals that regulate our understanding of the world and ourselves—may have been frustrated at the realization that a plurality of interests, sometimes incommensurable, were intrinsic to the human condition. With this watershed, we likely wondered then, as we wonder now, how well do our ideas represent the world *as it really is*? How can we ever know? Are all kinds of knowledge *the same?* Do the methods used to secure

truths in biology resemble the methods used to secure the *truths* of politics? Are there many *truths*, appropriate to the questions being answered, or is there a single unified truth no matter the methods or *kinds of questions*?

For those committed to privileging their own thoughts and beliefs and the primacy of their own vocabularies, another question might have arisen then as it arises now: is there even a world *as it really is*? While answering these questions has often presented recalcitrant challenges to the philosopher, the scientist, and indeed, the theologian, these questions and our responses have helped shape our public vocabularies and subsequently, our diverse and complex public squares. Those who have maintained a comprehensive ideal have sometimes claimed answers to how our *thoughts* and *reality* are aligned and how truth and objectivity are not merely convenient (or, indeed, inconvenient) myths.

Of course, we are familiar with those in power defending self-serving myths—*or even explicit falsehoods*. Recurrent, sometimes these myths are consanguineous, fearfully erecting seemingly impervious borders in aid of rationing or inventing 'facts' and protecting loyalties. Such loyalties depend on thinking that 'my' group's beliefs align *better* with 'reality' than the alternatives available. And my fealty for the principles of this community over that is grounded largely on birthright and tradition. In this sense, it seems a commonplace for idiosyncratic, incommensurable worldviews to clash over our most fundamental values—ideas core to who we think we are and how we ought to be—*and live*.

In recent years, pseudo-scientific 'experts' have defended against vaccinations. Others with vested interests in a particular kind of economy have denied the relationship between human activities and the climate crisis. Sometimes such defenses have ignored territorial issues, both side-stepped claims to *national* sovereignty, and have defended such claims when convenient. Others, still, have elided histories of the less powerful and disadvantaged. Questions once thought under the jurisdiction of 'experts' in relevant fields are sometimes adjudicated in the court of public opinion, arguments dissected and reassembled on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This court's pernicious intentions can be camouflaged by the pretense of respectability and the broad protection of free speech. Defective reasoning can be easily masked; favouring of hasty generalization, ad hominem, and the seductive forces of consensus has become a toolkit for political conformity and the possibility that a 'shared world' is not epistemically justifiable, but a political imperative to be imposed.

Entering this maelstrom of conflicting vocabularies and values presents significant challenges to those working in colleges and universities. It is also a challenge to those defending the efficacy of liberal learning. This collection of

PAGES MISSING

FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

About the Authors

James Cunningham, Ph.D. James is the chief tutor at Quick Thinking Tutoring, in Toronto, and teaches at Mount Royal University (MRU), Calgary. Prior to his association with Quick Thinking and MRU, James spent fourteen years as a philosophy instructor at Ryerson University (2000-2014), having first received his doctorate in philosophy of education at University of Toronto/OISE, in 1998. He has written articles on critical theory, existentialism and his primary concern, humanities education. When he is not tutoring, teaching, or writing, James enjoys his extreme old age in the company of his wife, children, and grandchildren.

Karim Dharamsi, PhD. Karim is a Professor of Philosophy and Chair of General Education at Mount Royal University. His scholarship has primarily been in the philosophy of history, the philosophy of education, and liberal education. Karim is the primary organizer of the Mount Royal University-Medicine Hat College Liberal Education Conferences, held between 2017 and 2019.

Deborah Forbes, M.Ed. - Deborah is an installation artist, educator at Medicine Hat College, guest curator, and public-school trustee. Her artwork has been shown in solo exhibitions across Canada. In addition to post-secondary instruction, Forbes has presented at many conferences in areas of visual art, art history, art education, creativity, design thinking, and chaos and complexity theory.

Ronald Glasberg, Ph.D. Ron is an Associate Professor at the University of Calgary. He teaches several history of ideas courses in the Department of Communication, Media and Film. His goal is to explore fundamental cultural assumptions as these have evolved throughout history in different cultural contexts.

Navneet Kumar, Ph.D. Navneet has a Ph.D. in Postcolonial Theory and Literatures from the University of Calgary and is presently teaching at Medicine Hat College, Alberta, Canada. He teaches courses in English literature, composition and liberal education. His areas of interest and research are race and refugee studies, genocide studies, pluralism, identity, religion, and violence.

Andrew Moore, Ph.D. Andrew is the Director and an Associate Professor of Great Books at St. Thomas University. His primary research interests are Shakespeare and early modern political thought. He is the author of *Shakespeare between Machiavelli and Hobbes: Dead Body Politics* (Lexington 2016). His writing on higher education and liberal arts pedagogy can be found in the *Journal of General Education, Transformative Dialogues, Times Higher Education*, and *University Affairs*.

David Ohreen, Ph.D. David earned his Doctoral Degree in Philosophy from the University of Wales, Lampeter, specializing in philosophical psychology. Before coming to General Education at Mount Royal University, he taught at the Bissett School of Business and the Faculty of Management, University of Lethbridge teaching a wide range of courses including social responsibility, business ethics, and environmental management. David's research interests bridge the complex interconnection between psychology and moral decision making. He is currently researching the motivations behind corporate funding of nonprofit organizations; the role of peer influence on moral decisions; and the extent to which empathy can be used to create good corporate citizens. He is the author of *Folk Psychology: It's Scope and Limits* and *An Introduction to Philosophy: Knowledge, God, Mind, and Morality* and has also published academic articles in psychology, ethics, and corporate social responsibility.

Jason Openo. Jason serves as the Director of Teaching and Learning at Medicine Hat College, and he teaches leadership and management principles as an Assistant Lecturer in the University of Alberta's online Graduate School of Library and Information Science. He co-authored *Assessment Strategies for Online Learning: Engagement and Authenticity,* published by Athabasca University Press in 2018. Jason received his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Albion College's Gerald R. Ford Institute for Leadership in Public Policy and Service, and his Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Washington's iSchool. He is now a doctoral candidate in Athabasca University's doctoral program in Distance Education. During his studies at Athabasca, he received the 2019 Outstanding Distinction Award for AU Graduate Students, and the 2016 Graduate Citizenship Award. His research interests include authentic assessment in digital contexts, faculty development for contingent faculty, and the ideology of technology.

Robert M. Randolph, B.A., M.A., M.A., M.A, Ph.D. Robert teaches English at Waynesburg University in Pennsylvania. He has been a Fulbright Scholar in Finland and Greece, has published poems in 50 journals, academic essays in ten more, and an award-winning book of poems. For 12 years he pastored a church close to the Monongahela River. As he was writing this, his daughter

said he should add that his wife and daughter are "both super cool," which they are. They have a cairn terrier and a black Labrador retriever. For four of the last five years red tail hawks have nested in the tall pines in his back yard. He believes liberal arts open us to awe, profound self-reflection, and demand a creative response in working on the world's problems.

Bruce Umbaugh, Ph.D. Bruce became a philosopher to try to understand everything. He works on issues about how various technologies embody values and on issues about human reason and knowledge. Courses he teaches include Critical Thinking, The Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment, Theory of Knowledge, Feminist Philosophy and Technology, Global Information Ethics, Making Decisions, and the Keystone Seminar Real World Survivor. He enjoys helping students discover new perspectives, make new intellectual connections, and formulate their own meaningful accounts of things. Bruce is (currently) the President of the Association of General and Liberal Studies.

Index

M

O

P

S

T

W