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RESTORING LOVE TO THE INTELLECTUAL LIFE

R. R. RENO

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Editor's note. Reno gave this address to the faculty of Oral Roberts University on January 9, 2017. It appears here in its original form.

Midway through my career as a college professor, I began to have serious misgivings about contemporary academic culture. I don't mean worries about political correctness or the overwhelming bias toward left-wing politics, although these are discouraging. Instead, my concerns revolved around a superficial and false intellectualism encouraged by higher education today. Skepticism and irony are pervasive. Students and faculty are trained to avoid being duped by advertisers, ideologues, and other hucksters of snake oil wisdom, and this goal has become more important than affirming truth.

Our academic culture encourages this mentality. As I've put it in a number of essays I've written recently,¹ when professors get together to talk about the goals of higher education, they almost always unite around the notion of "critical thinking," which in practice means disenchanting students by raising doubts and giving priority to questions rather than answers.

In itself, critical thinking can be a good thing in the intellectual life. Both the Greek philosophical tradition and the Old Testament put strong emphases on critique. Socrates was famous for questioning of conventional wisdom. The prophets of Israel pronounce words of judgment against Israel's tendency to slide toward idolatry. In both cases, critical thinking purifies by exposing falsehoods *as* false. This is surely

a necessary first step toward affirming truths *as* true. To develop as an intellectual, the dross of error needs to be burned away.

Today, however, critical thinking is put forward as the essence of the intellectual life, not an aid in its development. As a consequence, we lose sight of something more basic. An intellectual needs to *desire* truth, because it is something we presently lack and must go outside of ourselves to find. This means that the root of the intellectual life is love. To love something is to seek an ever-greater union with it, which is exactly what a genuine intellectual desires in relation to truth.

The term that Greek thinkers and early Christians used to describe the overall pursuit of truth and the full cultivation of the life of the mind was *philosophy*, the love of wisdom, not *sophiology*, the rational study of wisdom. They recognized—and, again, this was true of biblically-influenced Christian thinkers just as much as pagan Greek ones—that we will never gain a larger view of reality unless we aspire to it. Larger truths are elusive. We can't grasp them unless we're animated by love's sometimes reckless passion. And passion is exactly what today's emphasis on critical thinking tends to work against.

Moments of Insight

In the mid-1990s I taught a number of times in Lithuania. The country had only recently secured its independence from the Soviet Union. Communism was officially atheistic, which meant that nobody was permitted to study theology. A courageous and indomitable woman, Egle Laumenskaite, invited me to come to teach a short course on postmodernism and theology. After listening to my lecture on Jacques Derrida, a figure whom I regard as an important spiritual theorist of postmodern nihilism, she said to me, “Derrida is following in the tradition of ancient skepticism.”

Her comment immediately struck me as correct. Derrida was a particularly talented proponent of “critical thinking.” His distinctive method, called Deconstruction, has a technical meaning, but we can see it in fairly simple terms. Deconstruction seeks to weaken truth, just as skepticism in ancient philosophy sought to neutralize the power of truth claims. In both cases, moreover, the weakening is proposed

as humanizing rather than nihilistic. Released from loves' desire for transcendent truth, ancient figures such as Sextus Empiricus promise that we can live more calmly and at peace. If nothing is worth fighting for, nobody will fight. If nothing is worth sacrificing for, nobody will be required to make painful sacrifices. Thus, Derrida's deconstruction and the ancient skeptical tradition do not counsel despair. They aim to make life more live-able by dissuading us from desiring truth.

The same can be said about Epicurus and Lucretius and the tradition of ancient materialism. I've come to see that materialism also functions as a disenchanting philosophy. If we recognize that everything is reducible to material processes, we can be released from anxieties about the meaning of life, allowing us to just get on with our lives. The idea here is not to depress us with meaninglessness. Instead, Epicurus thought that materialism brings freedom from despair precisely because it disabuses us of higher aspirations.

In the years since that remarkable experience in Lithuania, I have become more and more sensible of the moral allure of critical thinking. It rarely takes the elaborate form of Derridian deconstruction. Nor does it usually adopt a radical skepticism or thoroughgoing materialism. But critical thinking in its present forms always involves disenchantment. If a young person comes to college with strong religious beliefs, many educators think that he needs to be challenged by "critical thinking." The same goes for someone with traditional moral convictions, especially when they concern male-female relations, sex, marriage, and family. In an academic culture of "critical thinking," the problem here is not one of truth or falsehood. At issue is the *intensity* of conviction, which our society regards as dangerous. Critical thinking, therefore, isn't meant to be a corrective stage in a larger pursuit of truth. The goal is disenchantment for its own sake. Loyalties need to be weakened so that students will be more tolerant, more accepting, and more inclusive.

Sextus Empiricus and Epicurus did not have these social goals in mind. Their skeptical and materialist outlooks promised a gospel of sorts. It was felt to be a consolation to know that nothing matters. And if you think about it, that makes sense. Life is full of disappointments, and, of course, death casts its dark shadow. Under these circumstances, nihilism need not

bring despair but instead offers peace of mind. Nothing matters—and so we can relax and need not worry too much over the meaning of our lives.

To some degree, the recession of Christianity's influence in the West contributes to the enthusiasm for "critical thinking" and disenchantment. If we must face our guilt and shame without the promise of God's forgiveness, it makes sense to explain away human freedom as an illusion, as many materialists do, or to argue for moral relativism, which is the skeptical solution. Both approaches weaken moral truth, which in turn weakens unpleasant feelings of guilt and shame.

The same goes for death. St. Paul mocked death—"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" (1 Cor 15:55). In doing so, he relied on the resurrection of Christ. Today's unbelievers do not so much mock death as downplay it with talk of the "circle of life," or encourage resignation, which is the most common approach.

To these trends favoring disenchantment I would like to add our increasing feelings of political and social impotence. The democratic projects of modernity seem to be coming to an end, replaced now by a technocratic regime of expertise. In these circumstances, ironic detachment functions as a consolation, a way to manage our suspicion that our lives don't matter all that much in an increasingly globalized system.

In sum: critical thinking has emerged as the highest ambition of higher education because it weakens convictions. This weakening is sought for its own sake and not as a means to the greater end of guiding students toward a firmer and stronger devotion to truth. Today, we prize disenchantment as a therapy of the soul. Our goal in higher education is to encourage the development of accepting, non-judgmental personalities rather than cultivating a potentially fierce and jealous love of truth.

Two Objections

When I speak on this topic, people often point out that a great deal of higher education engages in a positive pedagogy that confidently inculcates into students strong convictions about truth. The natural sciences provide an obvious example, as do technical disciplines in the STEM fields. This objection accurately portrays what goes on in classes in electrical engineering, nursing, and physics. But it does not

contradict my main point. From Pascal I learned an important truth about the life of the mind, which is that science provides us with firm but existentially inconsequential truths. The STEM fields are not oriented toward truths that illuminate the meaning of life. They do not help us understand how we should live nor what we should live for. As a consequence, the postmodern imperative of disenchantment need not bother itself with the first and second laws of thermodynamics. We can have a scientific and technological culture that is thoroughly disenchanted. In fact, a sure strategy for promoting disenchantment is to insist that the only “real” truths are scientific ones, for that weakens truth, not by encouraging relativism, but instead by encouraging scientism.

The second objection comes when some point out that today’s educational environment is characterized by a sometimes fierce political correctness that’s enforced with a great deal of zeal. This suggests, critics say, a selective application of critical thinking rather than wholesale disenchantment. I find this objection unpersuasive as well.

Political correctness is best understood as enforced disenchantment rather than a rival system of strong convictions. Take a look at the terms of abuse. The transgressors of political correctness are not criticized for being *wrong*. They are described as “judgmental” or “bigoted.” The sin is not against truth; it’s against tolerance or inclusion or diversity, depending on the circumstances. The paradox of the contemporary university culture that celebrates critical thinking and, at the same time, enforces an elaborate code of conduct is apparent, not real. What we have today is a moralistic anti-moralism, one that denounces strong beliefs as “divisive” and “hateful,” while announcing itself committed to affirmation and acceptance. The object in both the politically correct judgmentalism *and* a disenchanted non-judgmentalism is the same. What we want today is the weakening of strong truths, not for the sake of truth, but in order to make the world a better place.

Enchantment

We need to be challenged, and our society begs for reformation. But it is important to recognize that the solution to our captivity to error and indifference to injustice is a pedagogy of enchantment that enflames us

with a love of and devotion to truth, not the way of disenchantment, which seeks to cultivate indifference.

As a young teacher I was knocked out of a complacent commitment to “critical thinking” when I taught St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. After reading a book of ancient philosophy, Augustine embarks on an intellectual journey. After reading other philosophers, he comes to believe that God is the all-good creator. Then he attends church and listens to fine sermons. He becomes convinced of the truth of Christianity. In a certain sense he believes, yet he cannot free himself from his loyalty to falsehood. He twists and turns but cannot break the chains that bind him. It’s too bloodless, therefore, to speak of false beliefs, as if we can just check our math, as it were, and cure ourselves of error. Any consequential belief is best understood as a love, which means false beliefs are false loves. For that reason, even though Augustine saw the error of his beliefs, he could not be free from their falsehood. Only a true love can overcome the power of a false love. We need to be romanced away from error, which is exactly how Augustine describes his conversion and that of his friend, Alypius. Addressing God, he says, “You have pierced our hearts with the arrow of your love.”

A similar view can be found in Plato’s *Symposium*, where Socrates recounts his own teacher’s account of love’s power to propel us toward the highest truths. But I prefer the vivid imagery of the opening, allegorical chapters of the Book of Proverbs (1—9). There, the men of the city allow themselves to be seduced by prostitutes and loose women. This sexualized image is commonly used in the Old Testament to connote the worship of false idols. In the Book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom tries to teach the men of the city the error of their ways by recounting the bad consequences that will follow from their false loves. One could say that Lady Wisdom deploys critical thinking in order to disenchant the bewitching idols. Such an approach, however, does not work. So Lady Wisdom changes her pedagogical strategy. She retreats to her palace, lays out fine food and wine, and then sends her most beautiful maidservants out into the city to call the men to her banquet (9:1–6). “Come,” beckons Lady Wisdom, “eat of my bread and drink the wine I have mixed.” She seeks to counter the seductions of error by presenting truth in an even more alluring form. She enchants, and her

enchantment leads the men of the city out of their love of what is false and toward a love of truth.

If we wish to cultivate a desire for wisdom, we need to give priority to enchantment rather than disenchantment in higher education. That need not mean discarding critical thinking. As I said earlier, pressing hard questions is part of the intellectual tradition in the West, as we see in Socrates and the Old Testament prophets. But critical questioning needs to take place within a more encompassing pedagogy of love and devotion.

Tradition plays a key role in this kind of pedagogy. *Traditio* means handing or passing on, the transmission of a precious inheritance. Higher education has been characterized by rituals such as matriculation and graduation, because students are being initiated into something sacred. Giving priority to functionalism and efficiency tends to downplay these rituals. Another enemy of ritual is an anxiety about hierarchy and desire to make everyone feel equal. These are among the many ways in which we disenchant all our social relations, and they need to be resisted. Ritual incubates devotion, and if we're to escape the gravitational pull of disenchantment we should encourage the re-ritualization of academic life. Perhaps professors should wear their academic gowns on a regular basis!

The very name “professor” suggests a form of life that provides role models of devotion. A PhD does not train one to teach. Instead, it is training *in* a discipline. At its best, this kind of graduate study, which takes place over many years, forms a person in a deep way, making him devoted to the distinctive methods and achievements of his discipline. For this reason, a teacher in higher education does not teach in the same way a primary or secondary teacher approaches instruction. He wants his students to learn, of course. But over the course of a semester, a genuine college-level class in philosophy, psychology, or physics needs to enact or in some way “perform” the discipline. So-called student-centered learning is a mistaken concept. A pedagogy of enchantment is professor-centered, not in a selfish sense, but because student are invited into that which the professor professes.

Taken as a whole, however, higher education needs to be more than a menu of diverse disciplines from which students chose. There needs to be a core or canon that serves as a common, shared focus for

the academic community. We invariably argue about what that core or canon should be. A pedagogy of enchantment is not static and authoritarian. However, we need to make a promise to students: If you devote yourselves to *these* key books and *this* tradition, you will not just become more learned, you will see the world in a fuller, more comprehensive way. If you study Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and the other great figures in our tradition, you will attain a margin of wisdom. At a place like ORU, the Bible should have pride of place, of course. In an important way, a core or canon outlines a path of ascent, which we need if higher education is to merit its claim to go higher.

There are other features of an educational culture that enchant. Good lectures are performances that, at the best, draw us in. A well-run seminar gathers students into a shared spirit of inquiry. Book-laden shelves in faculty offices remind us that our love of learning has no end. But I cannot outline all the details. Every institution is unique, and in any event what is crucial is the teleology of an educational culture—the end, goal, or ambition of pedagogy—not its administrative structure or range of subjects. As you certainly know, the Bible itself can be taught in ways that disenchant young people who harbor hopes that they might find lasting truths in that sacred text—or it can be taught in ways that encourage those hopes.

Our Difficult Moment

We live in an era of weakening. A consensus now dominates that regards strong, life-engaging truths as a threat. We've even reached a point at which the plain truth of our bodies—that we are male or female—is being called into question. To speak of “gender assigned at birth” is to engage in a radical disenchantment.

I don't want to engage in a tiresome refutation of transgender ideology, which is in any event beside the point. This ideology is part of a moral and spiritual project, not an intellectual one. It seeks a therapy of the soul oriented toward a general indifference toward truth and open-ended acceptance of others. This sort of approach is seen as necessary in order to usher in a utopia of equal freedom, which means the universal affirmation of everyone in whatever way they wish to be affirmed.

Instead, I want to draw attention to our situation as educators, which is difficult. If today's secular culture discourages young people from thinking that our bodies can speak to us with clarity about the truth of who we are, then it will difficult to encourage students to seek the moral and spiritual truths that are more remote and uncertain than our male and female bodies.

In our present circumstances, therefore, the last thing we need is facile talk of "critical thinking." A contemporary reading of Shakespeare may teach useful lessons about race, class, gender, and other human realities that we must reckon with. But the direction is downward. Critical analysis, as its presently understood, is reductionist in the sense that it tends to dissolve complex human realities into lower things such as instinct, self-interest, and the will-to-power. This downward move disenchants, and truth's spiritual possibilities are limited.

God calls us toward him. The church fathers spoke of fallen man as bent over, looking downward. The Holy Spirit unbends the human spirit, raising our eyes upward. We need to recover the upward movement in higher education. It won't come by appeals to authority, nor will it be made possible by pious exhortations. Instead, we need a pedagogy of enchantment, one that is willing to entertain metaphysical ambition, and one that takes the risk of fanning in young people the always-present yet presently dampened desire for the transcendent.

R. R. Reno is editor of *First Things*, America's premier journal of religion and public life.



Note

1 *Fighting the Noonday Devil — and Other Essays Personal and Theological* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011).

