Italian states would be hanging those guilty of homosexual offenses, while the vast majority of the human failings that Dante and other moral theologians catalogued—and ranked more grievous—would pass unnoticed or at least unpunished by the same Christian society.

This leads almost ineluctably to the suspicion that something else, something less analytical and more visceral, motivated the sudden increase of intolerance. Here the historian may yield to other disciplines, such as psychology and sociology, more capable of testing and reporting on how humans decide which variations from the norm—as they perceive it—constitute desirable rarity (exceptional athletic ability, uncommon virtue, unusual hair color), which are unimportant (lack of religious belief, low sex drive, peculiar culinary tastes), and which are threatening or sinister (the "wrong" religious beliefs, minority sexual preferences, dark skin color). Historians can only inform such researchers that these norms are not constant in human populations and that there is dramatic change in periods like the later Middle Ages where one can study these shifts actually happening.

There may be, ultimately, no satisfactory answer to the question that underlies Richards's muddled text: What was the dark force that turned Europe from the diverse and relatively tolerant mixture of cultures and peoples of the early Middle Ages into the fanatical, narrow-minded rigidity of the later Middle Ages? The problem yields to analytical scrutiny no more readily than the more recent and familiar horrors of the Holocaust. When the many proffered explanations have been adduced, compared, and added up, the evil seems inexplicably greater than their sum, and one yearns to view its perpetrators as mindless minions of some clear-cut, irresistible devil rather than persons like us, caught in a complex interaction of cultural, social, and economic pressures. By looking for a simple explanation, we are in a way recreating precisely what they did—looking for a scapegoat—and we would learn a more valuable lesson from history by accepting the dismaying, uncontrollable complexity of human existence and remaining determined to be decent, humane, and compassionate in spite of it.

—John Boswell is chairman of the history department of Yale University and the author of The Kindness of Strangers: The Abandonment of Children in Western Europe from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance *(1989).*

What's Really Wrong with the University

by Denis Donoghue

THREE RIVAL VERSIONS OF MORAL ENQUIRY. By Alasdair MacIntyre. Univ. of Notre Dame. 241 pp. $24.95

It is well known, but perhaps not well understood, that American colleges and universities have again become noisy places. Not noisy or violent as they were in the Vietnam years: There is no sign of blood in the classroom or the cafeteria, or of demonstrations, sit-ins, and strikes. But there is a good deal of irritation in the corridors, and there is a lot of resentment. Think of the feelings aroused by such considerations as gender, race, "the canon," authority, feminism, "aesthetic ideology."

I am not sure that I can contribute much enlightenment to any of these issues. But I have been doing a little reading in their vicinity and have been thinking about the current situation in higher education generally, so far as I have any sense of it.

One of the books I have been reading is Alasdair MacIntyre's *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry.* MacIntyre's conclusions

here are in line with those of an earlier book, *After Virtue* (1981), in which he argued that the reason discussion of moral issues is interminable and inconclusive is that all the concepts which inform our moral discourse "were originally at home in larger totalities of theory and practice in which they enjoyed a role and function supplied by contexts of which they have now been deprived." It is impossible to have a fruitful discussion about abortion, for instance, because the terms of the rival discourses are fragments broken off from earlier vocabularies—such as those of ancient Greece, medieval Christianity, and the Enlightenment—which are no longer sustained by the systems of value and belief in which they once participated. In *Three Rival Versions*, MacIntyre finds the same incorrigible situation in our universities and wonders what (if anything) we can do about it. He finds teaching and scholarship—especially in our humanities and social-science departments—to have these four characteristics:

> There is first a remarkably high level of skill in handling narrow questions of limited detail: setting out the range of possible interpretations of this or that short passage . . . . Secondly: there is the promulgation of a number of large and mutually incompatible doctrines often conveyed by indirection and implication . . . . Thirdly, insofar as the warfare between these doctrines becomes part of public debate and discussion, the shared standards of argument are such that all debate is inconclusive. And yet, fourthly and finally, we still behave for the most part as if the university did still constitute a single, tolerably unified intellectual community . . . .

Frankly, MacIntyre leaves me bewildered at this point. If what he says about the fourth characteristic is true, why do we find it impossible to agree on anything? Presumably his answer is that we merely pretend to be rationalists. Under pressure we revert to our real convictions and prejudices.

But later in his argument, MacIntyre suggests a more persuasive reason, and it touches upon one of the means by which universities keep going and, for the most part, going in peace. We talk about the intellectual community, but we don't believe in it. We conspire to let the idea of such a community remain entirely abstract and hypothetical; in practice, we have settled for the dispersal of a community into several autonomous constituencies. Each of these goes its own way and minds its own business. Pluralism is the ideology which enables me to consult my pedagogical interests and you to consult yours. So long as I don't interfere with you or (even more to the point) you with me, our rival constituencies can live under one roof.

MacIntyre thus appears to imply that the conditions of discourse are constitutionally hopeless. Each of us is a partisan for his or her own system of values. We can't even imagine what it would mean to hold a different system:

> The neutrality of the academic is itself a fiction . . . . It is not that the adherent of one particular standpoint cannot on occasion understand some rival point of view both intellectually and imaginatively, in such a way and to such a degree that he or she is able to provide a presentation of it of just the kind that one of its own adherents would give. It is that even in so doing the mode of presentation will inescapably be framed within and directed by the beliefs and purposes of one's own point of view.

If MacIntyre means what he says, he would have us believe that the privilege conventionally given to the imagination is specious. We normally say that the imagination is the mind operating under conditions of freedom, freedom not absolute but sufficient for most human purposes. If I can imagine being different from myself, or from my sense of myself, I can enter with sympathy (or envy, of course) into the life of another person. That makes sympathy possible; if sympathy, then communication; if communication, then participation in a community. MacIntyre appears to say that this sequence is impossible because the first act in it, the imagining of

difference, is impossible.

I would be loathe to agree with MacIntyre on this momentous issue. It would make nonsense of every claim I have made for the merit of art and literature. It would mean that not only the aesthetic imagination but the moral imagination is an illusion: I cannot imagine being other than I am. I'm not sure whether MacIntyre intends to disable me to that extent. But I recognize, belatedly indeed, that theorists of the imagination—I include Immanuel Kant, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats—have rested their arguments upon the assumption that the imagining of difference is possible and that the resultant feelings are genuine. They have not pressed the assumption very far or asked what precisely it entails.

It is my prejudice that the imagining of difference is possible not only to great poets like Shakespeare but, within our limits, to you and me. But I'm sorry that I have taken it for granted; I should long ago have tried to examine the evidence and to determine the status of an imagined thing. Perhaps it is not too late. It would be appalling if it turned out that the act of imagining is a self-delusion, that what I take to be the imagining of difference is merely a self-bewildering imagining of the same, myself returned to myself.

David Bromwich, a professor of English at Yale, has glanced at one aspect of this matter in a recent essay in *Raritan* called "Higher Education and Group Thinking." Bromwich is replying to Henry Rosovsky, the Dean of Harvard, who, at a Lionel Trilling Seminar at Columbia University, told his audience, *The University should not expect more harmony than exists in the real world.* Bromwich draws out the implications in Rosovsky's remarks.

> ...what [he] means is: people want to study that which they already are by birth, or have come to be by custom and habit. And so, women's studies for women, Judaic studies for Jews, Afro-American studies for Afro-Americans, Asian-American studies for Asian-Americans. The list is easy to round out even though there is no clear place for it to stop. But the contents of the list all point in one direction; this is a genetic code for intellectual identity. It says, I am what I came from (what my parents or their parents were). And to the extent that my background does not absolutely define me, the objects of my culture absolutely do.

Bromwich calls this "the reflection theory of education," and he rejects it. So do I. It is an insult to students; in effect it says to them: You have no interest in knowing anything else or in questioning what you take yourself to be.

Reading Bromwich's article, I found myself recalling an essay written by Lionel Trilling in 1961. In "On the Teaching of Modern Literature," Trilling wondered about college teaching in the humanities and about "the relation of our collegiate education to modernity." The unargued assumption of most curricula, Trilling said, is "that the real subject of all study is the modern world; that the justification of all study is its immediate and presumably practical relevance to modernity; that the true purpose of all study is to lead the young person to be at home in, and in control of, the modern world." The assumption, put like that, seems hard to question. But Trilling confessed that in practice it drove him to something like despair. Trilling hoped that there might still be, in each of his students, a certain force of will, reluctant to be domesticated: a force of will, in the impervious form of personal density or gravity, which would question every proffered form of piety.

It may occur to you to wonder how the power of will, which Trilling ascribes to his ideal young man and which we would now also ascribe to the ideal young woman, came to establish itself as a force independent of acculturation and ready to declare its independence. I don't understand how such a force of will could have arisen in our student, and how it escaped the assimilating grasp of cultural formations and their sustaining dialects. Perhaps Trilling felt impelled to posit such a force, because he couldn't bear to think that it

might not have survived, might not have maintained its recalcitrance.

Later in his essay, Trilling speaks with desolate eloquence of a form of education he did not think he would live to see in place. He had been reading Thomas Mann's story "Disorder and Early Sorrow" and thinking about Mann's Professor Cornelius "with his intense and ambivalent sense of history":

> For Professor Cornelius, who is a historian, the past is dead, is death itself, but for that very reason it is the source of order, value, piety, and even love. If we think about education in the dark light of the despair I have described, we wonder if perhaps there is not to be found in the past that quiet place at which a young man might stand for a few years, at least a little beyond the competing attitudes and generalizations of the present, at least a little beyond the contemporary problems which he is told he can master only by means of attitudes and generalizations, that quiet place in which he can be silent, in which he can know something—in what year the Parthenon was begun, the order of battle at Trafalgar, how Linear B was deciphered: almost anything at all that has nothing to do with the talkative and attitudinizing present . . . founded upon the modern self-consciousness and the modern self-pity.

It is easy to patronize Trilling in that paragraph and to say that he was just tired, he needed a sabbatical, he was weary of listening to the same rigmarole, the same themes, the same complaints. But what seems to me not to be taken lightly is its sense of the curriculum as being all the better for not being continuous or contiguous to the lives of the students. We cannot ask our students to imagine difference if we don't offer them access to forms, rhythms, ideas, and facts utterly separate from the daily interests of their lives. It might be asked, What's so special about the order of battle at Trafalgar or even about the deciphering of Linear B? But the themes don't matter, except that they locate an interest beyond immediate interests: Let us call this an intrinsic interest, an interest in the theme for its own sake and not for my sake or yours.

I am aware that Trilling's idea of a university—which in this respect also appears to be Bromwich's idea of a university—is based on the value ascribed to the teaching of subjects which have no immediate bearing, and perhaps no producible bearing at all, upon the lives of the students. I recall from my school days being taught algebra, trigonometry, and coordinate geometry, subjects I found interesting precisely because they were remote, because they did not importune me to respond to them as live issues. All the better for that, I say now and hope I thought then.

It follows that mathematicians are in a more fortunate position than we who teach literature. They can interest their students in certain mathematical procedures because they know what an intrinsic interest is. Trilling evidently thought that knowledge, getting to know something one's daily life doesn't need, might provide the conditions of an educated and active force of will. He doesn't seem to have noticed that his three instances of something worth knowing—the Parthenon, Trafalgar, Linear B equations—are themselves acculturated: They have issued from the cultural interests of a class, a group, a constituency. They are not exempt from considerations of power, however long I may wish to postpone those considerations. I still hope to retain a sense of the intrinsic, and propose to appease it in terms mainly aesthetic, but I am aware that this proposal, too, is compromised and might be shown to conceal a political program. There is no winning in these situations.

So where are we? I don't want to add my murmuring to the noise in the universities. Except for a final word. When I urge the imagining of difference, I don't mean the consideration which is appeased by current talk of "pluralism." Indeed, someone might innocently assume that pluralism refers to the imaginative acts by which a person or group comprehends and connects to quite different persons. But in educational practice today, pluralism

works by giving students occasions of meeting other students whom they regard as already kin. They have immediate interests in common. They make what I have called a constituency. The contents of their courses are designed to minister to that interest and to keep the students together. If pluralism has a more exacting meaning, I am afraid I have failed to understand it or to recognize it when I see it.

—Denis Donoghue, a former Wilson Center Fellow, holds the Henry James Chair at New York University.

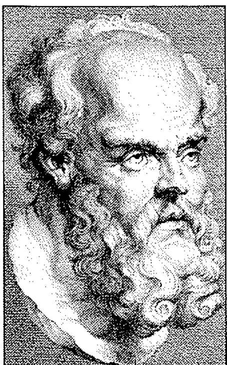
OTHER TITLES

Arts & Letters

SOCRATES: Ironist and Moral Philosopher.
By Gregory Vlastos. Cornell. 334 pp. $57.50

Can someone profess to be ignorant—to have "no wisdom, great or small"—and still be considered an important thinker, indeed one of the founders of Western culture? This is the paradox of Socrates (470?–399 B.C.), who, in fact, wrote nothing himself. Scholars studying Socrates must decipher the thought of someone they haven't read but have only had secondhand glimpes of—in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, in Aristophanes's satirical burlesque in *The Clouds*, and, of course, in Plato's "reproduction" of his conversations in the *Dialogues*.

Socrates's supposed ignorance provides the starting point of Vlastos's study, a 40-year labor of love. (Vlastos, professor emeritus at Princeton, died last October, shortly after the publication of *Socrates*.) Socrates's profession of ignorance, Vlastos says, must be taken ironically, suggesting only that all knowledge is questionable and must be justified by rational argument. Yet Socrates's refusal to give his philosophy a "positive content," to accept any human notion as a given, hardly gives an individual much to go on. Vlastos attempts to locate in Socrates a solid philosophical foundation by examining two key concepts: virtue and happiness.



Most scholars have argued that Socrates saw happiness and virtue as one, suggesting that no real evil can come to the truly virtuous man. Such an identity hardly makes sense to Vlastos, who says that a virtuous "inmate of a Gulag" would then be "as happy as an equally virtuous inmate of a Cambridge college."

Rather, Vlastos thinks that Socrates held that virtue, while not identical with happiness, was the *sufficient* cause of it (although other things—health, fortune, family—make "some tiny but appreciable contribution to the design"). Socrates manifested his own virtue in the *Dialogues* through a process of reasoning that was incorruptible and independent of all outside influences. In the *Phaedo* he treated his own imminent death—ordained by an unjust judicial sentence—as little more than the occasion for such a rational discussion. This aloof, calm Socrates has for 2,000 years set a model of the intellect as coolly thinking and judging, unmoved by such unworthy considerations as fear, affection, pity, or revenge. Recently, however, both the political commentator I. F. Stone (in *The Trial of Socrates*, 1988) and the psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz (in *On Dreams*, 1991) have objected that Socrates's detached reasoning is irrelevant to much of what human beings do. Although Vlastos admired Socrates for more than half a century, here, in his final evaluation, he too concludes that a Socratic sufficiency within oneself is insufficient for living well—and compassionately.