

# Expertise and Education

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In discussion it is not so much weight of authority as force of argument that should be demanded. Indeed the authority of those who profess to teach is often a positive hindrance to those who desire to learn; they cease to employ their own judgement, and take what they perceive to be the verdict of their chosen master as settling the question.

—Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* I.10

IN THE POLYPHONIC DISCOURSE ON THE FUTURE OF THE humanities in higher education, much has been said about what the humanities are—and aren't—good for. In the December 20, 2021 issue of *The New Yorker*, Louis Menand (an English professor at Harvard who co-founded a year-long introductory course in the humanities for freshmen) declared that: “Humanists cannot win a war against science. They should not be fighting a war against science. They should be defending their role in the knowledge business, not standing aloof in the name of unspecified and unspecifiable higher things.” In Menand’s sights were some recent advocates of the humanities whom he understands to denigrate science—as a kind of hydra of all material, quantitative, and empirical thinking—in favor of the “ineffable” outcomes of humanistic education. According to Menand, “Knowledge is a tool, not a state of being,” and humanists should get better at flexing their implements.

This strain in the conversation is certainly exciting, but what does it tune out? For Menand's argument to work, "humanists" would have to know what they know, and demonstrate it. There is, apparently, no room for a Socrates, who occasionally, frustratingly claimed to know only that he knew nothing. Is there time and patience enough before the ship of the humanities sinks to consider the potential benefits of abdicating epistemic authority? Could it be that the best education requires a student to ask what knowledge is, instead of simply acquiring it from the credentialed dispensers? The Catherine Project, a relatively newborn nonprofit, was launched partially in response to this question.

What the Project does is apparently simple: instead of students, we enroll readers in seminars on great works of literature, philosophy, and natural science. Volunteers facilitate conversations between eight and twelve readers without directing them toward a determined conclusion or claiming expertise in the subject at hand. There are no credits to secure, grades to maintain, academic honors to win, or entrance fees to establish participants' investment. Those who stick around must be committed in earnest to a serious discussion of ideas untethered from the conditions typically imposed in the learning business. This situation can be uncomfortable for those used to these conditions and this discomfort is worth exploring.

Among the guidelines for discussion that are shared with all participants, one presents especial difficulty: "When you refer to sources outside the shared reading, including historical or other context, you claim to be an expert at the table. A good conversation relies on sources that all present can evaluate; the text read in common should be central." Participants in Project seminars occasionally struggle to refrain from commenting on the historical or intellectual context of a text under discussion. In a discussion on Aristotle, someone is liable to generously offer an explanation of Plato's thinking on the subject. This tendency is exacerbated by the absence of the authoritative voice of a teacher who is presumed to know more than their students.

The insistence on dealing exclusively with primary sources strikes many as radical, mistaken, and overly difficult. Authors, texts, and ideas do not exist in isolation: they are informed and influenced by other ideas and forces. If we want to understand Aristotle, we *should* consider what he learned from Plato. The Project does not reject this way of thinking. Rather, we take it quite seriously—so seriously that we do not take for granted the essence of such influence. Instead of simply accepting someone else's gloss on the relationship between ideas, we ask our readers to actively consider the issue on their own terms.

The Project can ask this of its readers because it understands education to be more than the simple transmission of knowledge or truth from the more learned to the less. For us, the questions

*What constitutes knowledge?* and *What is knowledge for?* are live. And we do not set for ourselves and our readers the objective of arriving at the “correct” understanding of an author, text, or idea. However ambiguous or ineffable it might be, we understand education as, in part, the cultivation of a human being’s ability to think for themselves. Could it be that such an education requires the courage to encounter one’s own perplexity before moving on to deeper understanding? And, if so, what do we stand to gain or lose from avoiding such encounters by immediately turning to the experts?

## **To know what knowledge is and what it’s for might require the consideration of even more fundamental questions, like what a human being is and what they’re for.**

The discomfort that readers in Project seminars experience when forced to think through a difficult text can be productive. If one is willing to dwell on the difficulty, to be unsettled and challenged by it, one can develop a flexibility, a stamina, an imagination of thought. As with the development of the analogous qualities in the body, pain is involved. The turn to authority—whether in the form of a teacher, well-informed peer, or explanatory footnote—is an easy way out of this labor, but it sacrifices a deeper learning for what passes as erudition.

None of this is to say that the Project is opposed to teachers. We are careful about who we allow to lead our seminars, but we also understand that the true teachers in our seminars are the books we read. Hence the engagement with what are commonly called the Great Books. We read these books in part because they constitute a conversational nexus: these texts read and speak to one another. If Aristotle came to a deeper understanding of the world after an engagement with Plato, perhaps we might too. And if Aristotle is not alone—if others have acquired their own distinct understandings of Plato—perhaps Plato can speak to many kinds of readers, at various points in their studies. Perhaps Plato, who wrote dialogues and not

treatises, understood that what he wrote would be difficult for some readers and that difficulty was pedagogically useful, not to be explained away by a commentator whose own degree of understanding is not easily vetted by the already perplexed.

We prize a certain amateurism, but not shallowness. This distinction may escape a culture that has ambivalently embraced a dichotomy of expertise and common understanding, so that—whether one favors trusting experts or suspects them of autocratic designs—it goes without saying that there really are experts. Because we abstain from this binary understanding of knowledge and its possession, our education is available to all, regardless of their educational or intellectual past. Those who facilitate our courses are as likely to learn as those who enroll in them, and we are confident that scholars stand to gain as much from the communal contemplation and study of profound texts as those who have yet to set foot in a college classroom.

Furthermore, we believe that there can be dialogue between readers from different walks of life. This further informs our insistence on dealing first with primary texts. When our seminars convene, we know that our readers have at least one thing in common: they have all read the passage to be discussed. If it is Aristotle, then they have Aristotle in common—not Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle or the latest scholarship. They must try to make sense of the text together. In so doing, they might learn—from Aristotle and from each other—how to be better thinkers and readers.

It is not at all clear that those who participate in these activities acquire knowledge. But then again, it’s not entirely clear (to me, at least) that knowledge is, in fact, a tool and not a state of being. To know what knowledge is and what it’s for might require the consideration of even more fundamental questions, like what human beings are and what they’re for. We could choose to be satisfied with the answers of those who appear to have considered the question more fully than us and simply move on, but then let us be honest about our situation: we are being informed, not educated.

The Catherine Project is a continuation in some form of an ancient, Socratic practice: to recognize that you don’t know, that you don’t have the answer and that you can seek it without waiting for the experts to enlighten you. The point of the Catherine Project is that you don’t have to seek on your own. ◻