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A Little Learning Is Not Such a Dangerous Thing



Plato's Academy mosaic in the villa of T. Siminius Stephanus in Pompeii, around 100 BC to 100 CE

As a Jew in a Catholic college, one of two Jewish students in my class, I had to take lots of philosophy. My motivation for going to this particular school was the high school teachers I admired who had graduated from there and the academic major I wanted to study. The school also had a championship basketball team and sports were a great motivation from the sandlots and the basketball courts of youth. The reason for my study of philosophy was because I was excused from having to take theology courses. The theology requirement also included a yearly spring retreat, another requirement that seemed to bother a few of my fellow classmates. I don't blame them, as a free week in the spring in New England was great. From

a contemporary perspective, the concept of a yearly retreat seems like a positive part of the school's theology requirement. Try to imagine a week of contemplation without the Internet. I was treated really well, but antiwar protest put my small circle of fellow student activists at odds with the majority of students, a fact that made sense. The school had a long tradition of ROTC membership and I had been a ROTC cadet during both my freshman and sophomore years.

My immersion in philosophy didn't add up to very much except for the course in logic I took during my freshman year. I learned how to reason and comprehend analogies. The remaining courses didn't mean much to me, areas of study such as cosmology and metaphysics, but I really liked the professor who taught the metaphysics course because he also taught medical ethics to premed students and very occasionally he would discuss one of those issues as it related to our class. I think that he was an expert in that field of study.

I wasn't exposed to the big three of Western philosophy: the Greek philosophers Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle, although I did study Aristotelian logic. I was left to fill in the Grand Canyon gaps of massive holes of knowledge in history and literature in my undergraduate education. The social sciences, in which I finally majored, were taught by excellent professors.

All of these decades later I'm trying to make sense out of a world that seems to have gone wild and looking at how the years I spent studying could offer insight into making sense of the bizarre environment in which I find myself. When I look at the political, social, and economic worlds around me it seems certain that I inhabit a different planet from that of the late 1960s. Even the natural environment, that seemed typical in its vagaries during those years, has become unmoored.

The texts I studied in philosophy were lacking and I found myself reading on my own for years. The great all-star of the philosophy that I studied at the bachelor's level was Thomas Aquinas and he was only referred to in passing. Aquinas' much earlier predecessor, Augustine of Hippo, in relation to the rules of war, interested me greatly, too, but any discussion of these people and their earthshaking work was absent from my studies along with other great thinkers in the development of that subject over the millennia. Now that rules in war seem to be mostly absent, the reading and actions I took part in over many decades make a lot of sense to me even without an early knowledge base. That some people I communicate with on the Internet don't realize how grotesque the many wars are that seem to play by the rules of the jungle or Wild West baffles me. I knew as a young kid delivering the afternoon and the Sunday major newspaper in Rhode Island that the issue of nuclear war was

not absent from my hometown because two of my customers in the late 1950s and early 1960s had built nuclear fallout shelters on their property. One of those shelters was built in the basement of a neighbor's house with whom I was friendly. That shelter was of such shoddy construction that it would not have withstood a big blow from an Atlantic Ocean hurricane, never mind a hydrogen bomb blast.

Now the genocide in Gaza is accepted by some while the Holocaust is rightly condemned. That glaring hypocrisy leaves those of goodwill lost to catch their breath. Viewing those on college campuses banned for protesting contemporary genocide and sometimes threatened with expulsion, while their supporters are sometimes sanctioned, makes for a strange new world. With wars and rumors of war so rampant, and few formal tripwires to stop a nuclear war, many wonder where humanism and common sense developed over centuries of thought and action have been buried.

It was my own reading that brought me back to the philosophical thinkers of ancient civilizations, both East and West, that would provide for an examination of the development of thought over the centuries. Philosophy is pretty dense reading and I've found that reading commentaries about some of the significant philosophers is often superior to reading primary source texts. What reading in philosophy does accomplish is to make the student a careful reader much like what is done by students of law. Reading and reflecting on philosophy provides an opening to examine what it means to live a life in an often incomprehensible contemporary landscape. Plato's Cave, where only the shadows of reality are known, and Socrates' acceptance of the will of the state are two significant illustrations of an early examination of how society affects a person. Philosophy fused with a humanistic perspective of some Eastern texts of theology, and much of the wisdom of the Old Testament's *Ecclesiastes* sometimes makes that incomprehensible environment somewhat comprehensible. My freshman survey course did not delve deeply into many works of literature, but *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) by Waugh and *Howard's End* (1910) by Forster treated themes and characters dealing with faith, betrayal, hypocrisy, and greed.

The wisdom of some ancient texts of Buddhism and *Ecclesiastes*, when it treats the issues of letting go of attachments seems meaningful at some level, but flies in the face of the importance of camaraderie that I learned in the late 1960s through politics and relationships, but is so hard to maintain now.

My best friend from college was in the Arts Honors Humanities program. He had the recognized best professors on campus and was exposed to the best courses. I always thought, even decades later as a high school counselor, so-called honors programs were inherently

unfair to students who were not taught by those professors judged to be superior and missed out on material of a high academic caliber. I've had to fill in the missing academic pieces all of these years later and the tuition and board my family and I paid were exactly the same as students in the honors program.

I welcome other sources of knowledge from a host of texts on politics, economics, and society. Chris Hedges' writings define contemporary society in the US and his recommendations for additional reading, particularly Sheldon Wolin's *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism* (2008) provided a new context in which to view the political structure of the US.

I find some of the so-called Great Books not quite that great, but I keep in mind the advice of a professor I had long ago who advised that reading great fiction would teach more about psychology than psychology textbooks. Beginning with the works of Russian novelists and playwrights of the 19th and early 20th centuries is a start. Dostoevsky, Chekov, and Tolstoy come to mind, and especially *Crime and Punishment* (1866) and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). A selection of British, French, German, US, and Italian authors are good sources of character studies and great poetry and plays. The names are too many to list, but Melville, Poe, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Austin, Keats, Yeats, Hardy, the Brontes, Dickens, Woolf, Orwell, and of course Shakespeare come to mind. How fictional characters deal with conflicts, both in themselves and with others and their interaction with the world tells much about the universal. A bench along a hiking trail in upstate New York tucked among the hills of the Taconic Mountains has the words of the Romantic poet William Blake: "To see a world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wildflower" are fitting for the natural environment of that landscape. The search for home that the *Odyssey* provides catches my imagination more than the endless bloodletting of the *Iliad* and its incessant misogyny. I find the poet Kenneth Rexroth's translations of Far Eastern ancient poetry superior to the voluminous writing of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913), who seems to be getting at the same themes, but in an almost endless circuitous route. This is not to dismiss Proust, however, I wish that the opening pages of his saga would have been a bit more honest in his use of the question: "Where are the snows of yesteryear?"

With major credits in both literature and history, but a single actual major in the social sciences, I find that writing that brings light to how we interact in the real world superior in some ways to fiction, but that is a personal prejudice. The point is to become a reader, or a listener of books, to think analytically and critically. A college degree is helpful to achieve literacy, but a library card could do just as well with sufficient motivation.

There are many lists available for some guidance in choosing books to begin with. This list is from a global perspective and not from the *New York Times* as it notes. This is another list that the *New York Times* missed. *CounterPunch* produces its own books. The now defunct *South End Press* has some of its titles online and others are available to purchase. From a left reader's perspective, many online libraries have few, if any, critical works in the social sciences.

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