Higher Education and the Political Regime
by Hadley Arkes
June 09, 2009

All education is moral education, because it carries an understanding of the things worth knowing—and a hierarchy of the things more or less worthy of being known. Moral education must also point to a certain end: an understanding of the ways of life that are better or worse for human beings. It must point to a certain kind of political regime in providing the cast of our lives: the laws that protect the integrity of families and the professions, and the terms of principle on which a decent people deserve to live. The following article is adapted from the Commencement Address Arkes delivered at Hillsdale College on May 10, 2009.

Years ago we brought back to my college, Amherst, one of our most accomplished graduates, a man who had simultaneously earned a Ph.D. in Philosophy and a law degree. He began his talk by remarking that all of the students gathered around him in the hall were representing already a serious departure from the principle of equality in distribution. For if their parents, he said, had settled the price of an Amherst education on the person in the neighborhood most deserving of that education, it is not clear that everyone in that hall would have been the recipient. Later on, at a dinner for him, he was asked about a life of teaching and writing. He said that writing came easily for him, and it allowed him to spend a lot of time working at home, with his family around him. He had four children, as I recall, ranging in ages from about 17 to 7. Some wise guy, gently ribbing him, remarked that it must be a considerable advantage to those children to have the concentrated attentions of a father who was, at once, a distinguished figure in philosophy and the teaching of law; and if those attentions were allocated to the young people in the neighborhood most deserving of those attentions, it is not clear that those four would have been the beneficiaries.

It is eminently fitting—it is not the mark of a crimped nature—that parents take a heightened responsibility for the children who are theirs. We know enough by now to know that this, the most natural of sentiments, has not always held true. Not all parents have been protective of their children; some have been willing to “get rid” of their children, and some have had a merchandising attitude toward their offspring. We think of Woody Allen’s line, that “this is a watch . . . that my father, on his death bed . . . sold me.” But this is a day for people who have borne their responsibilities, parents and children, in reaching this day, and reaching it in the presence of faculty pursuing a rather distinct mission . . .

I don’t want to sound like that cleric described by George Eliot in Daniel Deronda, a man who seems to fancy that his personal correspondence was part of the history of Protestantism. But I wonder if I could lead you into these remarks by telling a bit of my own experience teaching at a small college in New England . . .

Early in my career at Amherst I was teaching a course on political parties. I told another junior
professor that I was determined that no student of mine would flub a question on political parties, as I had during an oral for honors as an undergraduate. My colleague confided to me that this was the wrong measure: we cannot make the course an annex to the graduate schools. Most of the students in the course will not even be majors in Political Science, and this could be the only course they will have in the subject. The question is: how does this course stand on its own as a contribution to a liberal arts education—which is another way of saying: where does this course on parties, of all things, fit into the history of philosophy?

My late colleague, Joe Epstein, once put it to me in this way: you are a doctor of philosophy resident in the department of political science; your task is to engage the students where they are, on the issues of the day that engage them—but then to lead them back to the enduring questions of philosophy. My friend Dan Robinson used to say that our mission was to shape students who could not be bought and not be fooled. And we happened to think, we young professors, that we bring people a long way to the point of not being bought when we bring them to the point where they are not easily fooled—where they are not taken in by slogans masquerading as principles. The question, we used to say, was whether our students had a principled ground for their motivations, and reasons for their actions.

In that vein, we used to cite that fine passage from Aristotle in the Ethics when he said that the study of politics may not hold much interest for those people, young or old, for whom life consists of a series of disconnected emotional episodes. But for those people who are genuinely concerned that there be some connection in principle between the judgments they made last week and the judgments they make today, this study of politics could be quite instructive. Or as Immanuel Kant put it, when we respect a person, we are registering our reverence for that law of which he happens to be an example. And so the question for us, forming our mission, is this: can we bring our students to the point where they can give an account of that law, or those principles, of which they purport to be examples?

We like to think that we are engaged here in what used to be called “higher education,” and it was especially suitable then to raise the question of what was indeed higher and lower in the things we could know. We come to know how to drive a car, but then we could drive an ambulance or we could drive a getaway car for the Mafia. And so we may ask, which is higher: the knowledge of how to drive, or the knowledge of those ends or purposes of driving that are justified or unjustified, right or wrong? The answer was contained in what we might call the logic of morals itself. As Thomas Aquinas taught us, the good or the right is that which everyone is obliged to do; the wrong is that which everyone is obliged to refrain from doing. The good is higher than the bad, more desirable than the bad. And so the knowledge of good, the knowledge of right and wrong is higher than the knowledge of technical means, because the knowledge of right and wrong is better than an ignorance of right and wrong, or a life lived with indifference to matters of right and wrong. Higher than the knowledge of driving the car is the knowledge—the moral knowledge—of the ends of driving that are good or bad, right or wrong, justified or unjustified. This leaves us with an uncomfortable question: who does the highest work in this society? Who has the highest art or science, the science that directs
Aristotle’s answer is one that predictably jars people or leaves them scratching their heads: the highest science, he held, is political science. Now I’ve seen political scientists gathered in large numbers, and when they are assembled in mass they don’t exactly strike you as the people you would trust to rule the world—or even accurately describe it. But political science is, at its best, the science of reflecting on the principles of justice, the nature of the just political order and the things we are justified in imposing on people with the force of law. Political science, as Aristotle thought, is the architectonic science, the science that knows the first-order principles that give proportion and scale to everything else.

*Science Without Political Science?*

Well, what about people working on new drugs that deliver us from high blood pressure, prostate cancer, diabetes and other ills? Wouldn’t that be more important than something like political science? As important as such life-saving research is, science itself still works under the governance of moral principles that are even higher. But we used to understand, also, that science itself worked under the governance of moral principles that were even higher. For there were moral limits on the way science acquired what it wanted to know. Some of the research carried out by the Germans during the Second World War had considerable utility for people in other countries. If we wanted to know just how icy were the temperatures that pilots could absorb when they were downed in the Atlantic, what better way to test the proposition than by dunking some prisoners, in the death camps, who were, as the saying goes, going to die anyway.

And yet we seemed to have been clear in this country—or clear until recently—that we should not do lethal experiments when there were alternatives that were non-lethal, and we shouldn’t do experiments with lethal risks on patients without their consent. Those moral inhibitions could indeed slow the pace and reach of research, but we seemed to understand that there were, as I say, serious moral limits even on what scientists deeply craved to know. And now, in our own day, we are faced with a choice of whether we will do research on stem cells extracted from embryos, killing these nascent lives, or whether we will use adult stem cells, or the newly contrived induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), cells that are formed by reprogramming adult cells, which can therefore be made from skin cells. They can be contrived without killing live human beings. The new methods involved here would allow us to produce the equivalent of embryonic stems cells for research without creating and destroying embryos.

The distinction is critical because each one of us began as an embryo—and it was all there in our genetic makeup—our likely height, our allergies, perhaps even our SAT scores. That embryo, and that alone, was you or I. When we make a decision either to allow the destruction of embryos in research or not, we make a decision at the top of the state about the kind of work we think legitimate and salutary, the kind of work we are willing to encourage by removing the moral and legal inhibitions, and licensing, encouraging, and promoting that work. And so a
whole new industry arises, with many people working in labs.

My point though is this: a decision is made by legislators, by people making laws—they are engaged in the highest practice of a political science, and the decision they make will either foreclose many people from making their livings in a branch of research involving the use of embryonic stem cells, or they will remove the inhibitions and cause that kind of work to burgeon. What is permitted then, in this new line of “work,” is the killing of human beings in their earliest stages. The people in official authority make a decision, and that will have the most palpable result in the way that thousands of people will be permitted or even encouraged to make their livings. Aristotle curiously had it right: political science is the architectonic science. It gives proportion and scale to everything else; it even decides which occupations we think fit for a decent people.

I once posed the question in this vein to students preparing themselves for medical school: did they think that the dignity of medicine in the United States was on the same plane as the dignity of medicine in the Soviet Union? I didn’t mean, how much money did doctors make or what status they enjoyed. I meant: were the ends of the medical art the same in both places? Was the status of medicine the same, say, in a concentration camp, where people were restored to some minimal health for the sake of returning to slave labor? Wasn’t medicine itself diminished in that setting? Wouldn’t the ends of medicine be higher in a country, or in a political regime, in which people were restored to health with the possibility then of living at the top of their potential—by living, that is, as citizens in a country in which they were free to join with their fellow citizens in facing the highest questions about the way they will live and the kinds of laws they would impose on one another?

If that is right, the point was simply that there are certain political regimes that will enhance or degrade the practice of medicine. The upshot for the student entering a liberal arts college then is this: if you’re a student preparing to become a doctor, you should be taking organic chemistry and biology, and it wouldn’t hurt to have physics and a brush with the neural sciences. But it also will matter profoundly to the integrity of your profession as to the regime that will supply the cast of your life in practicing your arts as a doctor. And so it may be useful to you to learn something, in college, about the principles that define the kinds of political orders that are just or unjust, and more or less fitting for human beings.

*Competing Allegiances*

This is the age of diversity in enrollments, and colleges have been recruiting students from more and more exotic places overseas. But do we care then about the kinds of moral commitments they bring to the college if they have absorbed the principles of those regimes from which they come? As Aristotle taught us, the good citizen is the same as a good man only in a good regime. If we brought to the campus in the 1930’s a German student who was loyal to the Nazi regime, a student who had absorbed within his character the principles of that regime, how might it have mattered? We have at Amherst students who have come from the totalitarian regime of
Vietnam and that curious, free market despotism in China. The question has to arise then of what are they bringing—and what is their intention in going back home? Do they hope to become a force to change their regimes, bringing them closer to an American model, when they return home? Or is it their purpose to use the skills they learn in America in order to put them in the service of a regime that may be hostile to our own?

We can hardly do better than to recall the notable example of that famous member of the Harvard Class of 1921, Isoroku Yamamoto, later Admiral Yamamoto, an early advocate of naval aviation, the man who commanded the Japanese fleet of ships and planes for the attack on Pearl Harbor. People may not recall that Yamamoto had a real affection for the United States; he was opposed to the war with the United States. He was opposed to the invasion of Manchuria; he was opposed to the pact with Hitler and Mussolini; in fact he was thought so politically unreliable that he was watched by military intelligence. Nevertheless he thought the highest honor was to die in the service of the Emperor and the Empire. He liked America, but he loved even more the Japanese regime.

It was found in a recent survey, by the Council of Graduate Schools, that in the fall of 2007, 241,095 non-U.S. citizens were enrolled in American graduate programs. About 55% were in engineering and the biological and physical sciences, whereas only about 16% of American students are enrolled in these fields. We could use these people—and many of them wish to stay—if our immigration laws would only permit people with these skills to stay. Many of them are in public universities, supported by public funds. Years ago New York State tried to limit this public education to citizens, and the Supreme Court struck down that move. But the Court missed the importance of a critical moral question: by the time a person has reached college age, why would it not be apt to ask, Are you clear on your own moral commitments? Are you clear on the character of that political regime that commands your allegiance in principle? For if you are committed, say, to using your skills as an architect and engine to help Albert Speer work out ways even more efficient for shipping people to killing centers, or to be an engineer for Saddam Hussein, what moral principle would oblige us to tax the American people for the sake of perfecting skills for the service of an evil regime? And would it be gross, or reflective of a narrow parochialism that we even raise the question? Or would we show a respect for the student himself as a moral being, with serious commitments standing before him? Or show that we as a country do take, as profoundly serious, the moral terms on which we live together?

All in the Family

That brings me, finally, to this place and to a day for the celebration of families. The point has been aptly made that the biblical injunction, honor thy father and thy mother, could not have been referring simply to the biological father or mother, for in that case we would be enjoined to honor the man who sired us in the course of a rape. But “duties” or “obligations” are moral terms, and they flow only to the people who have fulfilled the moral office of parenting, the people who have been there to nurture, to protect, and sustain.
Aristotle said that the polis, the political order, was prior in the order of nature to the family. This urbane man certainly knew that people were perfectly capable of having sex even when their governments broke down. But that was different from a family. For what constitutes a family? Would it be two people—or several joined together in a polygamous or polyamorous ensemble? Would it be two people of the same sex, the same species? What constitutes a family is something that has always depended on the moral understanding that pervades the community and finds expression in its laws.

Our late friend, Allan Bloom, wrote that “the children who are the products of nature and real love lack something that can be provided only by law and its constraints.” He went on to say that it is only within the context of the law that a man can really imagine that the offspring from his loins can people the world. The law that gives names to families and tries to insure their integrity is a kind of unnatural force and endures only as long as does the regime of which it is a part.

Those laws on marriage invited us, as parents, to say the most telling words that parents may say, as they claim their children as their own, and do it through that simple device of imparting a name. As they do that, they replicate those words spoken by God in relation to Israel, the words that any parents are invited to speak in accepting their vocations. And is there finally anything simpler or more decisive than those words that come back to us from Isaiah: “Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name, thou art mine.”

This is a day when we celebrate again the parents who have given their names to children, borne the responsibilities for them, and the students who have borne their own responsibility, in a handsome way, by working faithfully to justify the sacrifices made for them, and to learn what this faculty has sought to teach.

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