



ACTA
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

“The Sovereignty of Truth”

By Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb

Remarks accepting

**The Philip Merrill Award
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education**

October 5, 2007

Washington, DC

“The Sovereignty of Truth”

by Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb

Thank you, Anne and Bill, for your very generous remarks. I feel that this is something of an “all in the family” occasion—and not only because of the introduction by my son. Having been present at the creation, so to speak, I remember the discussions about the scope of the organization and its title; it was originally a forum, I think, for alumni and only later expanded to include trustees as well. And I have taken great pleasure in watching the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (as it was renamed) become, in only a dozen or so years, a significant force in higher education in America, an antidote to the ills that currently afflict our universities.

I am greatly honored today to receive the Philip Merrill award—all the more because it commemorates Philip Merrill, a charter member of ACTA, a public servant of great distinction, and, as it happens, a friend of mine and a neighbor to boot.

I am also honored to be placed in the company of the two distinguished previous recipients of the award, Robert George and Harvey Mansfield. In his acceptance address, Robbie George elaborated upon

the ACTA motto, “Promoting academic freedom and excellence.” Freedom and excellence, yes, he said, but more precisely, freedom for excellence. Not freedom for its own sake, but freedom for the sake of excellence, “the well-being and fulfillment of human beings.”

Harvey Mansfield took up the theme of excellence and gave it a new turn. It was not any kind of excellence that interested him (one could be excellent in small things, he pointed out), but the specific kind of excellence that makes for greatness. And greatness, he reminded us, is a function of “human dignity”—the dignity that attaches not to humanity as such, the species as a whole, but to the individual aspiring to greatness.

I would like to add another ingredient (or perhaps two ingredients) into this recipe for excellence—morality. And morality not for its own sake but for the sake of truth. Morality and truth—in the culture we now inhabit, and in the university more particularly, each of these words is problematic, and together they sound intolerably, unredeemably Victorian. So it is perhaps appropriate for me—a neo-Victorian, I have been called (pejoratively, of course)—to bring them together on this occasion. And appropriate, too, to invoke on their behalf a great Victorian, John Henry Newman.

Newman’s *Idea of a University*, based on the lectures he delivered in 1852 upon assuming the post of rector at the new Catholic University in Dublin, was meant to persuade Irish Catholics of the merits of a university devoted to the teaching of “universal knowledge.” It was his own beloved Oxford University Newman had in mind, but the example he cited was the medieval Church. Confronted with the challenge of

philosophy (in the form of Aristotle), the Church had sent her theologians (Thomas Aquinas, most notably), into the fray, to fight, Newman said, “the battle of Revelation with the weapons of heathenism”—to fight, that is philosophy with philosophy, reason with reason. “It was no matter whose the weapon was,” Newman said, “truth was truth all the world over.” In that spirit he urged both sides, science and theology, to join in a common cause, the common belief in “the sovereignty of Truth.”

“The sovereignty of Truth”; “Truth was truth all the world over.” It is ironic that today, more than a century-and-a-half later, that message is still so pertinent, addressed, however, not to the parochial parishioners in Dublin but to the most sophisticated professors in the most prestigious and eminently secular universities in this country (and, alas, abroad).

If a neo-Victorian can venture into more recent times, I would like to pay tribute to two of my own intellectual heroes, each of whom confronted an assault on the sovereignty of truth—and, with it, on morality. In 1972, long before relativism had metastasized into deconstructionism and postmodernism, Lionel Trilling, in the first of the Jefferson Lectures, launched a powerful attack on those in the university who denied the “authority of mind” by rejecting the “intellectual ideal of objectivity.”

In the face of the certainty that the effort of objectivity will fall short of what it aims at, those who undertake to make the effort do so out of something like a sense of intellectual

honor and out of the faith that in the practical life, which includes the moral life, some good must follow from even the relative success of the endeavor.

This, Trilling reminded us, is what is at stake in the pursuit of truth—nothing less than “intellectual honor” and “the moral life.”

So, too, another of my intellectual heroes, Sidney Hook (who, incidentally, has been memorialized by the National Association of Scholars in its Sidney Hook Awards). In his autobiography published in 1987, two years before his death, Hook reflected upon two unfortunate developments that had befallen the university in his lifetime: the *Walpurgisnacht* (as he called it), in the late ‘60s, when students mindlessly rioted and university presidents and deans mindlessly capitulated, and, more recently, when estimable professors propounded the view that “the concept of objective truth is vacuous and that what passes for the quest for truth is merely a disguise for the quest for power.” As a pragmatist, Hook was especially offended by this denigration of objectivity, because while he believed truth to be relative, in the sense that we could never arrive at absolute truth, he also firmly believed in the absolute integrity of the process of the search for truth and in the absolute commitment to the ideal of objectivity essential to that process.

I had always believed, and was fortified in that belief by my study of John Dewey, that intelligence was the supreme virtue. I had taken for granted the operation of moral courage. After discovering that it was in such short supply in the academy, I began to wonder whether, as necessary as intel-

ligence was, it was sufficient, and if not, what was the source of moral courage.

He puzzled over that question, he said, but found no satisfactory answer to it. But he has, in fact, given us the answer—in his own life and in his work. Forty years ago, when we were experiencing the first effects of the cultural revolution, he warned us of the double peril that came from a “failure of nerve” and an “eclipse of intelligence.” We have had painfully to relearn, thanks to Sidney Hook, Lionel Trilling and other brave souls, what the ancient philosophers first taught us: that moral courage and intellectual courage are reverse sides of the same coin.

My final testimonial to that odd couple, truth and morality, comes from an unlikely source, the British novelist and essayist Julian Barnes.

We all know [that] objective truth is not obtainable, that when some event occurs we shall have a multiplicity of subjective truths which we assess and then fabulate into history, into some God-eyed version of what ‘really’ happened. ... But while we know this, we must still believe that objective truth is obtainable; or we must believe that it is 99 per cent obtainable; or if we can’t believe this we must believe that 43 per cent objective truth is better than 41 per cent. We must do so, because if we don’t we’re lost, we fall into beguiling relativity, we value one liar’s version as much as another liar’s, we throw up our hands at the puzzle of it all, we admit that the victor has the right not just to the spoils but also to the truth.

I don't presume to speak for Barnes, but I am confident that if Hook and Trilling were alive today (and probably Newman as well), they would have been proud members of ACTA. If we could bestow membership on them retroactively, as Mormons do on their ancestors, I would move that we do so.

In the meantime, we can take some satisfaction in knowing that we are acquiring new allies in the universities—not only those professors who are joining us in resisting the intellectual and moral nihilism that pervades academia, but also those students who are resisting the pressure of their benighted elders. We have all been appalled by the professors at the University of California who prevailed upon the Regents to withdraw their invitation to Lawrence Summers to speak to them at a dinner (this at almost the very time that Columbia University was inviting the president of Iran to address the entire university community). But too little mention has been made of the fact that when Summers received an honorary degree from Harvard this past June, he received an enthusiastic acclamation—an “eye-splitting applause,” it was described—from the graduating seniors and graduate students.

I shall conclude, then, by paying tribute to all of those—past, present, and, in the case of the students, future as well—who share the guiding principles of ACTA: freedom and excellence—and, yes, truth and morality.

Professor Gertrude Himmelfarb



Gertrude Himmelfarb is professor emeritus of history at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. For many years, she was chairman of the doctoral program in history, and until 1988 she was distinguished professor of history.

Professor Himmelfarb has written extensively on Victorian England and on contemporary society and culture. Her works include: *The Demoralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (1995), *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society* (1994), *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (1984), and *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (1959).

Professor Himmelfarb has received fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Woodrow Wilson Center, the American Council of Learned Societies, the American Philosophical Society and the American Association of University Women.

Professor Himmelfarb is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Woodrow Wilson International Center, and sits on the Council of Scholars of the Library of Congress, the Council of Academic Advisers of the American Enterprise Institute and the Board of Advisers of the Library of America.

She received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

The Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education



ACTA is most pleased to be presenting the third annual Philip Merrill Award for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education.

The awarding of this prize, made on the recommendation of a distinguished selection committee, advances ACTA's long-term initiative to promote and encourage a strong liberal arts education.

The Merrill Award offers a unique tribute to those dedicated to the transmission of the great ideas and central values of our civilization and is presented to inspire others and provide public acknowledgment of the value of their endeavors. Past recipients of the award are Robert P. George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and founder and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions at Princeton University (2005) and Harvey C. Mansfield, William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University (2006).

The prize is named in honor of Philip Merrill, who served as a trustee of Cornell University, the University of Maryland Foundation, the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, the Aspen Institute and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

Mr. Merrill was a founding member of ACTA's National Council.