Greatness in a Democratic Education

By Professor Harvey C. Mansfield

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Boston, MA

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Remarks accepting

The Philip Merrill Award
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

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The Chilton Club
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Greatness in a Democratic Education

We sometimes hear of the place of the great books in a democratic education (not, unfortunately, at Harvard). When it is said approvingly, that place is at the center or in the foundation of education or both. We also sometimes hear of the need for excellence in our education, for example in the fine talk given at this occasion last year by Robert George. For some reason we do not much hear of the need for excellent books or for greatness in our education. I want to speak tonight of the difference between excellence and greatness, of greatness as a specific kind of excellence.

I take excellence to be the sum of goodness. Since good things can be great or small, one can be excellent in small things such as personal grooming. Not in all small things: picking your nose with skillful delicacy does not qualify for excellence. Well, why not, since it is done well? The reason, I believe, is that this activity does not accord with human dignity. Greatness is the kind of excellence that has to do with human dignity, and when a certain excellence is against human dignity we are reluctant to call it good, let alone great.

To be dignified one must think well of oneself, one must respect oneself. To do this one must respect the best in oneself, and so in the first place, one must respect what is human as opposed to what is commonly animal. Men and pigs both eat, but men eat from tables at a decent distance from their food while pigs slurp from a trough (an observation by Glaucon in Plato's *Republic*). Human dignity, however, pertains not only to the common dignity of human beings but also has gradations that give some humans dignity over others. In the highest case dignity culminates

in human greatness, which is always achieved by great human individuals. One could speak of the greatness of the American people, for example, in carrying on the Cold War through many trials and bringing it to a successful conclusion despite the legendary impatience and inattention of democratic peoples. But this feat could not have been achieved without great or near-great individuals, the American presidents from Truman to Reagan—and particularly those two.

Greatness, as opposed to goodness, is associated with the individual, and not individuals abstractly but particular individuals with proper names. A collectivity can qualify for greatness, like the American people during the Cold War, if it is a particular collectivity. A species can be good, and there can be grades of goodness so that species can be ranked, raccoons above ants—though modern biology is uncomfortable with any notion of hierarchy. We non-scientific people dignify animals by making them pets, and giving them pet names. What does this show? It shows that we humans have dignity and also confer dignity. Our dignity is especially to confer dignity on ourselves, or better, to claim dignity. We confer dignity in response to a claim for it, sometimes a loud claim, sometimes unspoken. Nature cares for species, giving them the means to be fruitful and multiply, but nature does not care for individuals. Nature, or God, made us with freedom enough to claim our own dignity; we have to do it for ourselves.

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Greatness may be achieved in a day or in a moment, but its memory must be durable. Since greatness is individual, it has a particular time and place. It is always shown in a context—a culture, as we say, a regime, as Aristotle would say. But greatness has a splendor that enables it to rise above its context and to appeal to many generations of many peoples. In this way an instance of greatness, which is always contextual, for example Greek or American, becomes an instance of human greatness that all can recognize. To memorialize greatness is the work of poets and historians, writers who can make a convincing case for the attention of later generations. When it is done well, the writers produce great books, books that celebrate human greatness. Sometimes the writers make us wonder whether they surpass their models: who is greater, James Boswell the great biographer, or Dr. Johnson, the model of greatness to which he always deferred? Great writers use their imagination to improve on fact, as did Thucydides when he invented speeches for the characters of his history. A great book such as *Don Quixote* can be entirely imaginary, or mostly imaginary. Perhaps the human imagination needs to begin from fact, building on what is visible, even if it is not confined to fact.

What of philosophy and its unconcern for individuals? The philosopher, said Socrates, is concerned with the what and not with the

who. He wants to know what justice is, not who is just and therefore deserves to be remembered with praise. Yet Plato made Socrates, a great individual, the central figure in his dialogues and left a record of the important events in his life, as well as his speeches, and was content, almost like Boswell, to celebrate Socrates' greatness without claiming greatness for himself. In the *Phaedo* Plato leaves it unclear whether he was present at Socrates' death.

What does this show us? It shows that philosophy studies the permanent problems of humanity such as what is justice, but does so in a context where the philosopher challenges the official answer or answers to that question. The what is always in a context of the who, even though the what transcends the who. Thus the philosopher is in one aspect indifferent to human greatness, and in another, involved in it because of his own greatness. He cannot avoid the greatness of philosophy, which considers both nature, providing for the species and caring nothing for individuals, and human nature, yearning for greatness. In displaying Socrates in speech and in action, Plato conveys to us that greatness does not necessarily consist of heroic exploits full of stress and drama. A philosopher can be great; a woman can be great.

I have supplied you with a preface to an argument for the use of great books in our education, based on the need for greatness in human life. Greatness is the culmination of individuality. Few of us are great, but all of us try to be great whenever we try to be individual. Try-

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ing to be individual is very different from the general concept of "individualism," as Tocqueville made clear. Individualism is the situation in modern democracies when individuals feel themselves to be incapable of acting on their own, incapable of being individuals. All are together in a mass, a huge quantity oppressive more by its number than by any wish to impose on others. Each impotent individual gives up on the effort to distinguish himself, retires into his family or circle of friends, and delivers his hopes or demands for society to government, an "immense being" that acts for the whole benignly—but not beneficently. The cure for individualism, Tocqueville shows, is partly to release the human impulse of intractability, the grouchy desire not to be governed by others. This negative sentiment is much in evidence in modern democracies, and it is mostly wholesome because it curtails ambitious schemes of patronizing control from big government. But being negative only protects you from others and does not justify your own claim for respect.

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For positive self-assurance you need the picture of greatness for inspiration if not emulation. "Self-esteem" is the byword of educational theory today. Self-esteem is fine if it is earned individually but harmful if it is awarded automatically because the recipient belongs to a class or category of the needy. True, we all need self-esteem but we do not need complacency or self-satisfaction. Mutual toleration is far from enough to fulfill our human dignity, for which we need something to admire.

Indeed it is impossible for human beings to live without admiring other human beings. We all have already the picture of greatness willy-nilly, as we have our heroes from childhood. It needs to be nourished and coaxed into improvement rather than created from nothing.

Two obstacles to education in greatness loom before us, modern science and modern democracy. These two powerful forces are in alliance. Modern science is progressive and always on the advance; it doesn't like to look back. Today's scientific findings rob yesterday's of any significance other than that of an antiquarian. Thus the greatness of past scientists like Galileo, Kepler, and Newton is diminished by their obsolescence. As human beings, scientists are of course not uninterested in who gets a Nobel prize, but this is apart from and at odds with their science, which is a collective enterprise that frowns on self-promoters if not heroes.

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Social science, moreover, has difficulty in understanding human greatness. It looks for the cause of greatness in the circumstances of mass movements or trends that make greatness inevitable, hence not really great. It is based on a simplistic psychology of maximizing the power of one's preferences or of overcoming one's necessities. It is blind to the psychology of greatness because it cannot see actions that sacrifice one's self-interest in order to espouse a cause. It has no inkling of human spiritedness, the quality of soul discussed by Plato, called *thymos*, that prompts us to assert a prin-

ciple by which to live—and for which to die—as opposed to surviving by any means possible.

Though social scientists would hate to admit it, social science is still a form of Social Darwinism which suffers from the attempt to explain the evolution of man by a principle, the principle of survival, that is manifestly untrue to the facts of human life, and above all to human greatness. Any education that wants to appreciate greatness would have to be critical of social science.

Modern democracy is envious of great men insofar as it is egalitarian. Even if great men have humble origins, they still belong to the few rather than the many. But to a surprising degree, by virtue of the now almost universal constitutional structure that incorporates executive power, modern democracy depends on one-person rule. American democracy especially welcomes great presidents when they appear and honors them after they die. To Americans, such presidents validate the wisdom of the founders in endowing them with an office that permits them, calls them forth, to be great. Great presidents remind us Americans of the greatness of our founders. Any American education in greatness could begin by appealing to the admiration most of us already have for those who initiated the society we now enjoy. I know, of course, that such an appeal is not as easy as it ought to be. It must overcome or bypass the denigration

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of the founders by the social scientists, today's version of the democratic historians, enemies of greatness, that Tocqueville warned against.

When we think today of the perils of democratic self-esteem, the focus is on the claim for unearned praise endorsed by doting educationists. Behind the claim lies the democratic dogma, as Tocqueville calls it, that each person is sufficiently competent to run his own life. That dogma may contain more than a little vanity. But what of the opposite case of a great man who deserves more than the esteem he can get from a democracy? "Towering genius disdains a beaten path," said Lincoln in his Lyceum speech. The desire for distinction in a great man represents a threat to the established institutions of a democratic republic. Yet it is not likely that a democracy is going to express its gratitude to such a person for not overthrowing it—no more than a man will thank his guest for not raping his wife. Thus the great man in a democracy must show his modesty in noble condescension to his fellow citizens, as he must consider them. Lincoln did this, and so did George Washington, whose name Lincoln recommended to be revered "to the last." It does no good to recommend reverence to an audience of college students, but you can perhaps show them good reason for reverence. You can be grateful for what great men have done for our country and at the same time take note, at least, of what they have refrained from doing. We democrats need to know that democracy has both a towering need and a limited appetite for greatness.

Professor Harvey C. Mansfield

Harvey C. Mansfield, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University, studies and teaches political philosophy.

A member of the Harvard faculty since 1962, Professor Mansfield chaired the government department from 1973 to 1977. He has written on Edmund Burke and the nature of political parties, on Machiavelli and the invention of indirect government, in defense of a defensible liberalism, and in favor of a constitutional American political science. He has also written on the discovery and development of the theory of executive power, and is a translator of Machiavelli and Tocqueville. He recently completed a book on manliness. Professor Mansfield has held Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities fellowships, and was on the Advisory Council of the NEH. In 2004, he received the National Humanities Medal from the President.

Professor Mansfield is no stranger to ACTA or ACTA's issues of academic excellence, academic freedom, and accountability. He has been a valued advisor and friend since ACTA's founding, and endorsed and contributed to ACTA's seminal study on grade inflation, *Degraded Currency: The Problem of Grade Inflation*. In 2000, former student Robert Krupp and ACTA's Fund for Academic Renewal supported Mansfield's translation of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

The Philip Merrill Award
for Outstanding Contributions to Liberal Arts Education

This marks the second 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, highlights ACTA's decade-long efforts to promote and encourage a strong liberal arts education.

The 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. Robert George, the McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at Princeton and founder and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions, received the inaugural award.

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, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

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