

Some Caveats About Character: A Response to Stephen Davis

**Gilbert Meilaender
Valparaiso University**

I am grateful for the opportunity to be here at Westmont on this occasion, grateful for the opportunity to read and hear Stephen Davis's discussion of the current state of the liberal arts, and grateful for this opportunity to respond briefly to it.

I am also acutely conscious of the fact that what I have to say in response will probably seem disappointing. It may be a bad idea to invite someone of slightly anarchic temperament to express his view on a topic that involves goals, requirements, integrated worldviews, and the like! There are many good things about Professor Davis's paper—not least its help in thinking about what we are doing against a large historical background. Still, it would not be terribly interesting—or helpful—for me just to repeat matters on which I agree with Professor Davis. So I will concentrate on my reservations.

There are a number of topics which I will mostly bypass today but which I would gladly take up were there world and time enough. Among the matters that emerge at one point or another in Davis's paper and about which I might raise questions are the following:

1. whether it is really so good to want our graduates to learn to work as “members of a team”;
2. whether it is really desirable to encourage “original thinking from students”;
3. whether a large portion of our problem may not, in fact, result from trying to provide a liberal arts education for many students who are not well suited for such study and who come to it with vastly different levels of preparation;
4. whether offering a “unifying worldview” as the potential answer to our problems can really be an answer for any except a very few schools;
5. whether intellectual depth might not, in fact, be better than breadth; and
6. whether “integration” of knowledge is something we can really provide in a curriculum or whether it may not, rather, be something that students must finally do for themselves.

I resist all of these, however, in order to consider whether it is a bad thing that “the university no longer sees itself as a moral teacher.” I am not terribly fond of mission statements or lists of goals for liberal arts education of the sort Professor Davis provides. As what he calls “templates against which to measure success or failure,” they bring joy chiefly to the hearts of “outcomes assessment” bureaucrats. If taken seriously, they are sure to bring all of us failing grades—which is, no doubt, why they are more often “finessed” than taken seriously.

But let us try to think seriously for just a moment about one of the eight aims he delineates: “character and integrity.” I begin with two brief reservations and will then turn to one somewhat larger concern.

(1) I have taught for a quarter century in three very different kinds of institutions—a state

university, a private liberal arts college, and a church-related comprehensive (but small) university. In each of them I have known many faculty whom I would prefer not to set themselves up as moral teachers for anyone about whom I care. And that seems to me to be the place where our concern for character should focus. Not on what courses are taught but on who teaches them. What sort of people do we hire? What are their beliefs and commitments? That—and not what is taught in the classroom—is what shapes the moral life of an institution.

(2) Our students are already formed—for good or ill—in important ways before they come to us. Indeed, I think college teachers regularly overestimate the amount of “formation” they do. If we really wanted seriously to shape those students, we should teach kindergarten. It’s just that many of us are probably ill suited to that task. In its most fundamental sense, morality is not just an intellectual training in rules or values and how to think about them (Hegel’s *Moralität*)—the kind of thing a college classroom can supply. It is a way of life deeply inculcated and lived habitually and unreflectively (Hegel’s *Sittlichkeit*). That kind of learning is not easily transmitted in a classroom.

These are reservations. But the deeper problem is whether virtue—in the sense of character and integrity—can really be taught. Socrates, of course, made that a famous question, but, for me at least, the deeper issue is, finally, theological. Good character is more gift than possession; it cannot be simply passed on. We should, therefore, be careful how much we undertake or promise.

Let me develop this briefly. In 1959 E.B. White published his revised edition of *Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr. The resulting hybrid—Strunk & White—must be one of the very few enjoyable texts ever written about syntax and grammar. In his revision White added a chapter titled, “An Approach to Style,” which is in many ways not just about writing but about morality.

For all the rules of grammar and syntax contained in Strunk & White—rules that can be taught in a classroom—White believes that we cannot easily teach good writing or explain it. “Who can confidently say what ignites a certain combination of words, causing them to explode in the mind?” he asks. He suggests that we consider Thomas Paine’s famous sentence, “These are the times that try men’s souls.” It would be possible to rewrite this sentence in other, grammatically acceptable ways, and White offers four such rewrites:

Times like these try men’s souls.
How trying it is to live in these times!
These are trying times for men’s souls.
Soulwise, these are trying times.

What makes Thomas Paine’s sentence memorable and the alternatives eminently forgettable? If we could really answer that, we might be ready to consider another question: What makes moral wisdom and character so much more than learning “about” values? Good writing, White notes, has a certain style which cannot be learned or

acquired simply from attention to the mechanics of language. It is passed on, but in much more subtle ways than the classroom can manage. As Katherine Paterson, writer of novels for children, once said in a review of several books about developing character in children: "No one of us has the answer on how to teach morality, any more than we have the single answer on how to teach reading. But just as children in reading families tend to become readers themselves, children who grow up in loving, moral homes tend to become people of compassion and integrity. Goodness is the fruit of gracious relationships."

White comments on two lines, which he regards as especially excellent, from a poem by Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson writes of a cow "blown by all the winds that pass / And wet with all the showers." And suddenly, White says, "one cow, out of so many, received the gift of immortality. Like the steadfast writer, she is at home in the wind and the rain; and, thanks to one moment of felicity, she will live on and on."

That is the secret: a moment of felicity. The gulf between good mechanics and true style, or between some instruction in critical reasoning about ethics and moral wisdom, is bridged only in a "moment of felicity." White appeals to the Muse. And it is noteworthy that his biographer, Scott Elledge, commenting on White's approach to style, is driven to the language of religion. "White's parting explanation, that good writing occurs in moments of felicity, does not undercut his instruction in the art of writing well. It only reminds the reader that though an approach to style can be taught, the achievement of memorable writing is a miracle."

And likewise, my reservations about the university as moral teacher do not undercut Stephen Davis' concerns about the current state of the liberal arts, nor even all of his prescriptions for improvement. But they do suggest that, when we think about the aims or goals of the liberal arts, about what a curriculum of study can or should attempt, we may wish, modestly, to content ourselves more with the—difficult enough—task of shaping the mind, and be less quick to sell ourselves as those who form the heart.