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Thinking and Rethinking: The Practical Value of an Honors Education

JAMES HERBERT

Formerly of the College Board and the National Endowment for the Humanities

(What follows is a significantly abridged and revised adaptation of an excerpt from James Herbert's 2014 book, To Jonah When You Are Twenty-Five: Taking Jobs Seriously.)

While teaching in the general honors program of the University of Maryland (1970–1980), I passed on a version of the education I had received in history, philosophy, literature, politics, theology, psychology, anthropology, and the other liberal arts. As I moved into another career, my situation reversed the old chestnut: I couldn't teach, so I had to find a way to do. I had often professed that a liberal education in honors was good preparation for life. My work life ended up testing that proposition and confirming it in unexpected ways that may be illuminating to those who are now supporting or administering honors education.

In 1982, I went to work for the College Board when its Educational Equality Project, a response to a long decline in average SAT scores, was stalled at a critical juncture. Hoping to clarify how students should prepare

for college, the College Board had consulted widely and issued a summary of the necessary “Basic Academic Competencies” (reading, writing, speaking and listening, mathematics, reasoning, studying) but had been urged also to address matters of content and to clarify how these competencies related to the subjects that students studied in high school, such as English, math, science, and history. The College Board had asked hundreds of people and organizations—parents, high school and college teachers, administrators, and disciplinary associations—what high school students should learn to be prepared for college. The process had been billed as a broad dialogue leading to national consensus.

When I arrived at the College Board’s offices in New York City, I found questionnaires, statements and summaries, and many engaged, excited people, but no consensus statement summarizing what students needed to learn to prepare for college, no concise companion to the statement of Basic Academic Competencies. Hundreds of contributors were mainly interested in whether their own bit of advice would be reflected in the summary. Teachers tended to be concerned with their own subjects and to neglect others. Organizations advanced positions that favored their own interests. At that time, the College Board’s SAT, then called the Scholastic Aptitude Test, was being criticized as content-free whereas the Board’s rival, ACT, presented its college entrance exams as content-based, so the issues were complex and the stakes were high for the College Board. If all the suggestions and lines of thought were not woven together into a harmonious whole, the fault would lie not with the many messages but with the messenger, and I had barely thought about the high school curriculum since I had taken it.

In that situation, I grabbed for whatever resources I had at hand. Each of the College Board’s six academic advisory committees had custody of one subject, and, as liaison to the committees, I inherited responsibility for the subject statements. In each seven-member committee, one or two members had begun to draft a preliminary statement, thus raising questions about the consistency of their draft with all the conversations that had gone before it. Here I relied on my honors experience in close reading of texts. I threw myself at the large corpus of transcripts, summaries, correspondence, and formal written submissions in each subject area in order to identify their key issues and major differences. Then, in reviewing its draft statement with each committee, I tried to raise all these issues and ascertain how the committee members thought the differences should be resolved.

As in an honors seminar faced with tackling complex texts, our work was just beginning. Members of a group do not automatically agree with each other or speak the same language, and specialized sub-groups can be incomprehensible to others in the large group. Moreover, no one already involved in this process had reason to think that I, an outsider and newcomer, knew what they were talking about or, for that matter, what I was talking about. The stakes were huge: these statements would potentially find their way into school curricula, college admission and articulation standards, state graduation requirements, test specifications, and especially the goals for school reform efforts. Entrusted to apply the work of all these committees to a nationwide effort, scheduled to last for the entire decade, I drew on my experiences in honors.

When teaching honors seminars, I had often asked participants to repeat the point made by the previous discussant before launching into their own comments. Sometimes we asked the previous discussants whether their comments had been accurately summarized. Such “reciprocal paraphrase” was intended, first, to encourage the students to listen to each other and to build their own thinking on that of others. Secondly, I hoped that the students, by learning to recognize differences among their own views, would come to differentiate between what they initially expected a text to say and what it would turn out to mean.

Under pressure to get right what the College Board’s academic advisory committees wanted to communicate, I cast myself as the second student in the process of reciprocal paraphrase. At every important juncture in a committee’s deliberations, I tried to slow the pace of discussion and repeat what I thought a committee member had meant, often asking for explicit assent. This strategy was not particularly comfortable. Good discussions race along with their own dynamics and do not welcome interruption. Moreover, by interrupting only in order to repeat what had already been said, I risked being taken as slow or ignorant. To this day I bristle when I recall the elaborately patient efforts of one committee member to explain to me the difference between a “model” and a “simulation.” But my approach worked: reciprocal paraphrase generated increasing confidence that we actually did understand each other. Moreover, it turned out to be an effective way of identifying actual disagreements and of seeking compromise.

The experience was scary but also thrilling as I appeared intellectually naked before groups of experts and tried to convince them that I understood and could communicate what they meant. As threatening as the world could

seem, this one way of interacting brought a bit of confidence and gradual solidarity. I became aware of the possibility of creating policy by rethinking what the others were thinking.

R.G. Collingwood, in *The Idea of History*, argued that the historian takes the testimony of a witness into his own mind in order to judge its coherence and plausibility: the historian rethinks such testimony. Collingwood went further to insist that the proper business of the historian is to think again the thoughts and motives of the historical actor. For instance, despite all the differences between Euclid and me, when I think that the two angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal I am thinking the very same thought that Euclid thought. “The truth which I recognize, or the proposition which I assert, is the same truth which Euclid recognized, the same proposition which he asserted” is how Collingwood put it, and also he wrote “if I not only read [Plato’s] argument but understand it, follow it in my own mind by re-arguing it with and for myself, the process of argument which I go through is not a process resembling Plato’s, it actually is Plato’s, so far as I understand him rightly.” The philosopher of history had taught me to try to apprehend “the argument simply as itself . . . as it can be developed in Plato’s mind or mine or anyone else’s. . . .”

Of course, my work on Educational Equality Project was easier than Collingwood’s on Roman Britain. The people I was trying to understand were there in the room with me; I could ask questions of them, and they could approve or amend my paraphrase. Other people were also present who could witness and confirm our shared understanding. Even with these advantages, the “rethinking” approach may seem unnatural. Most people assume that ideas are like things and that, if an idea is in one person’s mind, something else must be in other people’s minds. That is exactly the assumption I would reverse. Ideas are not like things, and it is quite possible for them to be in more than one mind at once. In fact, rethinking ideas is normal, and I found reciprocal paraphrase increasingly useful and effective throughout my work life. Working with the College Board committees, I learned never to let an idea pass that I did not understand, always to interrogate it, paraphrase it, and try to work out a mutual understanding.

Rethinking the ideas of others is a potent basis for coming together. I began to think of it in terms of a maxim I had learned from my constitutional history professor in graduate school, who insisted that, beneath every constitutional conflict, one could find a political conflict. I was turning this maxim inside out. When I encountered conflict in a group, I tried to suspend or push

past political differences in order to focus on the core point of disagreement. Often it turned out that agreement was relatively easy to achieve and could calm other kinds of differences. People who agree about what a certain document should say are less likely to quarrel over who gets to draft it. Jane Addams reputedly held that all conflict arises from misunderstanding. I wouldn't go that far, but I do think that people should seek mutual understanding as an alternative to conflict in almost every case of disagreement.

Years later, when I went to work for the National Endowment for the Humanities, I again found that a key assignment had been identified for me. The Endowment had promised to undertake an initiative to support foreign language education, and my assignment was to design that initiative and make it a success. I promptly began drafting what became NEH's "Special Opportunity in Foreign Language Education." In working out this initiative, I turned again to the "rethinking" approach that I had learned to trust. I situated myself between two partners—one a language professor and the other my boss at the Endowment—with whom I reviewed every word of the emerging plan. I worked closely with each, being careful to do so separately.

At first I didn't pay much attention to the panel review process for grant applications to the National Endowment for the Humanities. Of greater concern was the subsequent—vertical—review process in which panel and staff funding recommendations were considered by committees of the National Council on the Humanities, the Council itself, the Chairman's staff, and finally the Chairman, who was responsible by law for the ultimate decision.

I usually enjoyed this vertical review process. It put our work on parade, gave staff members an opportunity to engage intellectually with members of the National Council, and occasionally led to improvements in a funded project or in the review process itself. Some people criticized the vertical review process as ordaining members of the National Council or of the Chairman's staff as "super-panelists" empowered to overrule specialists on the basis of some imputed greater knowledge. My confidence in the possibility of rethinking the thoughts of others made this criticism almost always seem beside the point. I welcomed the opportunity to rethink proposals with our higher-ranking colleagues at NEH to achieve a fuller mutual understanding of them, the same kind of result that my early experience with reciprocal paraphrase had led me to expect. Knowing that we don't have to know more geometry than Euclid to follow his arguments, I was confident that we could explain, justify, or accept improvement to the panel and staff recommendations without having to sneak anything past our bosses.

In the panel meetings themselves, the staff chair played only a procedural role: essentially to ensure that each application was taken up and fully addressed in turn. The chair's initial concern was that the panelists understand each other's judgment of each application. Here the chair, as well as the panelists, deployed the arts of rethinking on which I had learned to rely. When we carefully elicited the judgments of each panelist, when we summarized, paraphrased, and compared statements, when we retrieved neglected comments, we were trying to make sure that the panelists understood each other. Since that time I have been part of other panels, such as those of the European Science Foundation, in which English was not the first language of all panelists so that we had to make even more careful use of the auxiliary tools of paraphrase, reiteration, and summary to ensure mutual comprehension.

The NEH professional staff members also were responsible for preparing written summaries of the panel proceedings for subsequent participants in the vertical review process. In writing these reports, we had to resist an inevitable inclination to build up proposals we favored and to undermine others. Here, as in writing for many honors seminars, the key skill was being able to write without embellishing or editorializing, to act on the principle that we can rethink and paraphrase the thoughts of others.

An important point about thinking and rethinking is illustrated in a story about Tom Foley, who, before becoming Speaker of the House, served as Majority Leader of the Democratic members. As a vote was getting underway, a colleague approached on the floor to ask why he should vote for the measure being considered. Foley explained a first reason, then a second, and then a third. The colleague voted for the measure and was then astonished when Foley voted against the bill and asked why, to which Foley responded that he had not been asked for reasons to vote against the bill. Work life—even in Washington—often calls for skills more substantive than advocacy or spin.

In a threatening and turbulent world, it is encouraging to realize that we can know, pretty well, that we are thinking the same thought as another person, who can also know what we are thinking. Recent intellectual fashions notwithstanding, thoughts actually are something that people can have in common. This commonality is a basis not only for human sociability but for effectiveness in the workplace. That people ordinarily rush past mutual understanding or that it is often difficult to achieve, frequently imperfect, or imprecise should not obscure the central reality that so much meaning does come through to be held in common. That we all can think and rethink

another's thought is what I learned in honors education and what turned out to be essential in my work.

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