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Pandemic Response: A Reflection on Disease and Education

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THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC CAUSED BY THE SPREAD of a novel coronavirus in early 2020 did more than transform the first one-and-a-quarter academic year that fell within its duration. It also transformed higher learning in its research and pedagogy. Like many misfortunes, COVID-19 has brought opportunity for growth and change. No doubt, there are many success stories of philosophers rising to the challenges of our time. In this contribution, I relate my own pandemic story, not as one of success, but rather as a humble attempt to grapple with the question of the post-pandemic philosophy curriculum. What is the place of philosophy in the twenty-first-century university? What might “philosophy” mean in a post-pandemic context, given the manifold crises—racial, health, economic, political, and so on—facing higher education? My argument—abbreviated and anecdotal as it is—is that the current and pending crises in higher education require a turn to what we might call the applied humanities. In my view, we should guide rather than resist the growing emphasis on pre-professional education. I make my case for this by reflecting on pandemic teaching and my development of a humanities-based curriculum focused on health, as well as on Du Bois’s later philosophy of education.

In February 2020, I was moved by some historically focused debates among epidemiologists. Was the pending health crisis, they wondered, on a par with the influenza of 1918, or rather more like those of 1889 or 1957? These candidates for historical antecedence had been unknown to me. The whole notion of a pandemic seemed rather “like something from the middle ages” (Porter 281), and I could not easily process the thought of an infectious disease suspending public life on a global scale. Nonetheless, the numerals denoting pandemic years—1889, 1918—weighed on my imagination. Had there been pandemics in the modern world? Disturbed by my ignorance, I spent my increasingly many down hours consuming books on the history of influenza, plague studies, and the history of diseases more generally. If I was

to live through a pandemic, I resolved, I would at least be acquainted with previous examples.

By early April, I had agreed, with some reluctance, to offer a summer class on COVID-19. Responding to a call from administrators, I hastily cobbled together some broad questions based on my recent reading: “Whence our ignorance about the history of pandemics?” “Is there an ethical or legal basis for the suddenly common distinction between essential and nonessential labor?” “How does our conception of disease pertain to our sense of the difference between citizen and immigrant?” I discovered, after further reading (see Reinhardt), that our ignorance about epidemics was at least partly the result of Johnson-era anti-Communist policies devised to promote democracy and American material culture in places like West Africa; that the extant legal arguments about essential labor did not support that notion’s expanded use in our pandemic context; and that paranoia about disease has long played a role in anti-immigrant propaganda.

To my surprise, I received numerous requests for media appearances about the pandemic, most notably, a feature on our local NPR-affiliate’s afternoon talk show. The episode was devoted to “The History of Pandemics,” and, fortunately, the producers also recruited an established researcher in the field, Ann Carmichael of Indiana University. The format allowed me to wax philosophical while Professor Carmichael provided the baseline knowledge. We exchanged ideas about the analogy, or lack thereof, between our experiences and the documented history of plague outbreaks. We compared, for instance, our daily perusal of Twitter epidemiology with Daniel Defoe’s story, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, about a Londoner parading from parish to parish to record the weekly mortality postings. My conclusion was that we were undergoing a common experience within the larger field of human history, but one that was veiled from our prior awareness due to culturally specific assumptions about diseases and health.

At some point, the slowness of pandemic life and the mundanity of online teaching muted my initial sense of wonder and curiosity—all that had been the mood of early pandemic life, which pandemic literary authors like Defoe and Porter had documented more skillfully than I could. I returned to subjects more aligned with my scholarly profile, and so to the customary concerns about specialization and productivity that rule academic life. My topic at that moment was Du Bois’s philosophy of education. Perhaps like other humanistic defenders of higher education, I was drawn to his early proclamations, such as from *The Souls of Black Folk*: “The true college will ever have but one goal—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (Du Bois 420). It seemed that I could glean from Du Bois some lessons about higher education in our context, perhaps even a robust defense of the humanities.

What I took from Du Bois in the middle of the pandemic, however, was something rather at odds with the customary defenses. His approach to the mission of the university was much more practical than these early passages suggest, and he eventually conceded some premises that we might associate (wrongly, I think) with so-called neoliberal criticisms of the humanities. A university, he argued, must prepare its students for work. University instructors, moreover, cannot execute their mission without an intimate knowledge of both the character of their students and the world for which we are preparing them (see, especially, Provenzo 194–95). His specific concern, of course, lay with the advancement of black people in America, and for him, the racial context was first and foremost. But his specificity on this point is precisely what led him to generalize a theory of education.

By the early 1930s, Du Bois's writings on education began to stress the relationship between education and work, whereas in earlier writings, he was prone to oppose labor to "the unhampered search for Truth" (Du Bois 423). Among these are his important addresses to Howard University and Fisk University, titled "Education and Work" (in 1930) and "The Negro College" (in 1933), respectively. The latter presents an especially convincing argument, the thesis of which might be restated (borrowing language from Justin Smith) as *all universities are ethno-universities*. Du Bois's context concerned black colleges in the South, and it is with respect to these institutions that he considered a universalist position: "It has been said that a Negro University is nothing more nor less than a university" (Provenzo 244). A university, black or white, American or Caribbean, is a university. Science is science. Philosophy, we might add, is philosophy. Readers of *The Pluralist* will supply their own interlocutors for these points. Du Bois himself was referring to one Abraham Flexner, author of a tome called *The American College* (Flexner, *American College*) and an eponymous *Report* (Flexner, *Medical Education*) that led to reforms in medical education.

After raising some anecdotes against Flexner's universalism, Du Bois focused his reply on the issue of student demographics:

[N]o matter how much we may dislike the statement, the American Negro problem is and must be the center of the Negro American university. It has got to be. You are teaching Negroes. There is no use pretending that you are teaching Chinese, or that you are teaching white Americans or that you are teaching citizens of the world. You are teaching American Negroes in 1933, and they are the subject of a caste system in the Republic of the United States of America and their life is primarily this problem of caste. (Provenzo 245)

One might suspect that Du Bois's emphasis on the cultural specificity of the college mission is tied uniquely to the horrors of Jim Crow, or to the place of

black Americans in a caste system. But he rejects this immediately by raising different examples: “A university in Spain is not simply a university. . . . It is education for Spaniards—not for them as they may be or ought to be, but as they are with their present problems and disadvantages and opportunities” (Provenzo 245–46). In the Howard lecture, he even claimed about earlier black students, rightly I think, that “the whole program of popular education became epitomized in the case of these young black folk” (Provenzo 181). Sometimes the marginal case best represents the whole, and the education of black Americans has been one such case.

In a subsequent passage of “The Negro College,” Du Bois commented on the tendency to overlook the ethnic character of the university. This time, he chose the French as his example:

There are some people who have difficulty in apprehending this very clear truth. They assume, for instance, that the French university is in a singular sense universal, and is based on a comprehension and inclusion of all mankind in their problems. But it is not so. And the assumption that it is arises simply because so much of French culture has been built into universal civilization. (Provenzo 246)

This leads Du Bois to one of his most striking concessions (though there are parallel passages from other lectures) in regard to the earlier debates with Booker T. Washington. Forging a synthesis between his earlier position and Washington’s concern with labor and wealth, Du Bois acknowledges the strength of the industrial approach:

[W]hile the Negro college of a generation ago set down a defensible and true program of applying knowledge to facts, it unfortunately could not carry it out, because the one thing that the industrial philosophy gave to education, the Negro college did not take and that was that the university education of black men in the United States must be grounded in the condition and work of those black men! (Provenzo 247)

There was much in both sides of the earlier debate that stood in need of correction, and this is not the place to make those qualifications. Suffice it to say that for the mature Du Bois, education is still about more than bread, and so not about making humans into wage earners. But nor is the purpose of education “the unhampered search for truth.” We should not romanticize, as the younger Du Bois seemed to do, the ideals of liberal education, or the humanities, or philosophy. Our ideals in any form of education should be “grounded in the condition and work” of our students and their future communities. In “Education and Work,” he goes as far as to mention “wasting time on Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and eschatology” when the mission of a

university is rather to train people (black Americans for Howard University, but *mutatis mutandis* for other schools) who “can help the world know what it ought to want done and thus by doing the world’s work well may invent better work for a better world” (Provenzo 186).

For these reasons—that the mission of a college is specific to the population it serves, and orients to the work to be done by its graduates—I find it ever harder to participate in the common defenses of the humanities. Too often, they concern only our Latins and Greeks, which for us means Plato, Kant, or Dewey. I do not lament, as many do, department mergers or program reductions as such. I rather wonder about whether the curriculum had been rooted, to repeat Du Bois, in preparing the students to “help the world know what it ought to want done.” This is not to say that philosophy does not serve such ends, but only that we might become more vigilant in reshaping the discipline to meet them explicitly.

With such thoughts in mind, I occasionally return to my studies of the history of disease, and wonder how several decades of scholarship left me unprepared on such a topic. My immediate response to the pandemic was to propose a new program in Health Humanities. In this, I followed a widespread trend in curriculum development, but one that is in at least mild conflict with my training as a philosopher. I find myself caught between two worlds, namely, between preserving something of a traditional philosophy major and developing a curriculum more oriented to the professional needs of my students. This is not to say, I repeat, that traditional philosophy programs do not prepare students for work. We have always claimed that they do. In my more honest moments, however, I admit that we might better build the argument, and more importantly the preparation, more directly into the curriculum.

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