Welcome to our twenty-seventh edition of “The Academic Journal,” a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

E Pluribus Unum | Out of Many, One

We live in a fractured nation, and patriotism is generally out of favor. Most ostensibly we are divided socially, politically and morally. However, the root to these divisions, I would argue, is more fundamental than where we tend to spend our time arguing and complaining. We live in a culture that values quantification and analysis, almost above all else. We take things apart, then we take the parts apart. Why? Ultimately, I believe, because our culture deludes itself by thinking it can deconstruct the material world (including humanity), control the pieces, and absolve itself of any moral obligations. Here’s the good news! MCA has the foundation and the tools to make out of the many, one, not to make everything the same, but philosophically, civically, and ethically to bring a sense of meaning out of the disparate elements by examining and teaching the pieces, percentages, and portions as they remain within a unified whole. And to everyone’s advantage we can consequently ask the ultimate questions like, “What does it mean to be human?” Let’s look at this idea from three reference points. In this issue we will look at E Pluribus Unum from philosophy. In subsequent issues, we will consider it from civics and ethics.

Since the scientific revolution in the mid-1500s, our cultural and intellectual heritage has attempted to deconstruct the cosmos and humanity, then dissect them again, and again, and again, all with the goal of understanding, but ultimately with the goal of mastering our surroundings and ourselves. During the scientific revolution, we began to accept the idea that knowledge, and therefore truth, is attainable only through our five senses. Our means of knowing were reduced to sight, hearing, taste, smell, and/or touch. In the 1900s and coming out of Great Britain, the philosophical school of logical positivism taught a principle called the law of verification. Simply stated, only statements that can be proven empirically are true. In other words, if you cannot see it, hear it, taste it, smell it, or touch it, it cannot be true. This made enough sense to gain some traction. In the United States, C.S. Peirce, the father of American pragmatism, perpetuated this idea and added that knowledge worth considering is knowledge that controls.

Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with empirical knowledge. Science is based on it, and there have been monumental advances in medicine, technology, and other sciences because of empiricism. To completely dismiss the findings of science would be misguided, if not foolish. However, we have rejected everything that cannot be measured—creativity, wisdom, ethics, human worth, the infinite, and so on. We have abandoned a priori knowledge, knowledge that proceeds from theoretical deductions, knowledge independent of experience. Furthermore, when the law of verification is placed under its own criterion for truth, it collapses because the law of verification cannot be proven empirically.

Nevertheless, we see this myopic focus on empirical data throughout our nation and clearly in our world of public education. If we can’t test it, we don’t provide money for it. If we don’t provide money for it, we don’t teach it. If we don’t teach it, it has little to no value. If it has little to no value, then we just discard it. We settle for teaching students only a portion of life—a narrow, limited body of knowledge. If it’s not finite and material we dismiss it. Consequently, we teach students efficiency and materialism, and lo and behold they become efficient and materialistic.

Our culture has drawn a line in the sand, separating the finite, the particulars, and diversity from the infinite, the universals, and unity. We have cordoned off the transcendent because we believe either it does not exist or we cannot access it. Either way, we are left with no absolutes. All we have is what we can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch. We are left with the many pieces of the here and now, yet we can neither look to the past nor the future to make sense of them.
As we deconstruct life we are forced to believe that the individual is an economic unit. (Consider that the goal of the Common Core is to construct students who are career-ready.) Or, we are forced to believe that the individual is a sociopolitical unit for reforming society. (Read John Dewey’s “Democracy and Education” in which the individual is a meaningful concept only when regarded as an inextricable part of society. Consider also the public schools in California and New England that now allow students to self-determine gender.) Or, we are forced to accept the individual as purely a biological unit. (Note a recent court case of a child left to die in a hot car that referenced a web site referring to having children as “adding to the biomass.” Notice also the numerous bumper stickers that equate a pet with a child, or the curriculum that address sex as a purely biological function.)

Sometimes we do want to take things apart to better understand them. If we reduce long division to its components, we can better teach it to fourth graders. We might want to disassemble a bicycle to repair it. We can theoretically take apart a galaxy in order to study what holds it together. If we parse words, let’s say, “metaphysics,” then we might better grasp its meaning. The Greek prefix “meta” means “after, beyond,” while “physics” comes from the Greek phusiké, meaning “the knowledge of nature.” Physics, then, is concerned with all aspects of matter and energy, and metaphysics is the science that studies “what comes after physics” or the study of the nature of reality and being.

Here’s where our story comes in! Even though we may take things apart, we do so with the understanding that the parts only make sense in terms of the whole. Embracing the study of the nature of reality and being, metaphysics gives us an opportunity to consider the story that encompasses all stories, the metanarrative. It’s a way to look at the whole of life. The faculty actually worked on this last year when they created educational units that brought cohesion to the study of various subjects. These units even went beyond that, at times inspiring our souls. That’s what happened when the first grade teachers explored with their students “What is home?” and what happened when the seventh grade teachers asked their students “What does it mean to be human?”

Because metaphysics deals with the abstract concepts of being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space—the transcendent—we can ask life’s bigger questions. For example, last year the second grade teachers developed an overarching question to guide one of their units: “What is a citizen?” The third grade teachers began with “What is the good life?” We can take a substantial curriculum and deliver it within a broad, meaningful, viable platform. We can look at reality as an integrated whole, rather than isolated bits of data. We can address history, mathematics, science, and language within a single story, rather than fragmented disciplines. We can discover the underlying tenets of our society. We can explore the relationship between truth, goodness, and beauty. We can defend the notion of objective truth.

Whether we realize it or not, we use metaphysics in our own lives. If we are not careful, we will accept and pledge allegiance to any view handed to us, whether that be from television, pop culture, or the politically correct. By acknowledging the transcendent, pondering it, and applying our subsequent ideas to our lives and specifically to our education, we can pursue truth and its corollaries of goodness and beauty. We can think in terms of a whole, rather than in pieces and parts. We can, with our students, begin to reassemble what has been disassembled. We can forge together a structure of truth consistent with reality.

MCA and other classical schools carry a torch, like a fire used to refine gold, that thrust light on new (but really, very old) ways of knowing, a light that burns away the dross of data bits that obscure hidden nuggets of objective truth. By acknowledging that the nature of reality and being are beyond what can be known, heard, smelled, tasted, or touched—beyond what can be measured or reduced to numbers—and by recognizing that we can study and know the metaphysical, we can boldly reclaim a way of knowing that includes but goes beyond sense perception. We can know truth rationally by inferring from what we can sense and by deducing from what we can think in our minds. We can make sense of and even reassemble the things that have come apart. We can help to bring out of the many, one.

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