

ANSGAR ALLEN

**BENIGN
VIOLENCE**

Education
in and beyond
the Age of Reason



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—*Professor Ian Stronach, Liverpool John Moores University*

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Benign Violence

Education in and beyond the Age of Reason

Ansgar Allen

School of Education, University of Sheffield, UK

palgrave
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Preface

This book is not designed for academic consumption, in the sense that academia is complicit in the object of its critique. For that audience alone it must remain an *indigestible meal*.

* * *

Despite itself, this text is confined by its context. Written from within the physical and conceptual architectures of the university, it is placed alongside other academic projects that provide the frame of reference against which it is judged. In the past, these projects were regulated by a solitary fear, the fear of over-reaching themselves, of going beyond their scope. If ideas were stretched too far, they might snap.

* * *

A fear of becoming stretched, or drawn, is a fear of rupture, excision and division. In this context, the quality of an academic's output is deemed proportionate to the strength with which it adheres to the work of others. By sticking together, academics hoped to achieve the density that would prevent their work from appearing insubstantial. These academics were in pursuit of thickness.

* * *

Traditionally, academic life was a cloistered existence. Academics achieved density by enclosing their work, measuring the thickness and security of their intellect against the strength of the quarantine that contained it. Academic debate was very elite and very confined, carefully protected from outside interference. Those statements that were permitted within would be those that could say something 'original'. In order to judge originality, to decide whether a statement was sufficiently academic in its form, there was an expectation that those participating in the debate would be familiar with previous statements concerning the object of enquiry. Without this knowledge they would be unable to judge the 'newness' of a new statement. The quality of a statement, the feature that marked it as distinctive, and thereby permissible in this context, was its relation to other near equivalents. This relational positioning is what gave each statement its academic substance.

* * *

Through these arrangements, academic discourse excluded all those not inducted into the debate, those who were unable to place a statement within a series of statements to which it belonged and thereby make sense of it. Academic discourse denied access to those unable to understand a statement in terms of its positioning. It debarred those who failed, or those who *refused*, to make a contribution in the permitted terms of scholarly dialogue. This book does not belong to that tradition, and would prefer not to be judged by its standards. If judges appear, it would be better if their reviews were bad.

* * *

Academic conventions are not easily escaped. This text cannot entirely evade the form of an academic monograph, nor can it avoid the influence of its institutional setting. It can serve to irritate convention, but irritants are often welcomed. Without norms there are no perversions, and academics enjoy, perhaps even delight in, putting down those who make them itch. Alternatively, an academic balm is applied. This serves to domesticate the wayward intellectual by translating his or her perversions into acceptable discourse.

* * *

The environment in which I work is, nevertheless, undergoing transformation. My colleagues tell me that the age of individual scholarship is over. Instead, we researchers must collaborate with one another, and with others too. This kindly injunction is hard to refuse if one wishes to avoid the riposte that, by refusing to embrace those with whom one has little in common, one is thereby defending the old academic order of specialisms and seclusions. Refusal also has its material consequences. Those who wander between disciplines, creating glib networks and partnerships, are more likely to receive their recompense. The large funding agencies prefer collaborative enquiry, and what they prefer the academy delivers. Various devices ensure that those who cannot, or will not, accommodate themselves to this new environment are marginalised, perhaps even silenced.

* * *

As with all great extinctions, it is a change in the environment, rather than the weakness of a species, that renders individuals vulnerable. The academic species facing extinction today is not inferior to its successor; it just performed different functions. It was constructed and schooled for a different context, in which it found itself subservient to a different logic of examination, one that promoted thickness and exploited a fear of becoming thin. Whatever the pitfalls of this old way of life – a way of life that has not yet expired, and may still adapt – a new species of academic is in the ascendant. It retains

some of the characteristics of its predecessor, but manages to approach the problem of thickness in reverse. Academics now over-reach themselves as a matter of routine.

* * *

It is said that the old seclusions of academic life are no longer viable. Distance and detachment are no longer praiseworthy attributes of the academic gaze. All research must have ‘impact’ and be accompanied by a ‘pitch’ explaining how this likely effect will be achieved. There is a repeated call to become relevant, or at least appear so, where appearances have been elevated above substance.

* * *

Reflecting on his own late nineteenth-century context, Friedrich Nietzsche put it like this: the journalist, he claimed, had become the ‘paper slave of the day’, having ‘emerged victorious over the academic in all cultural areas’. The academic’s only resort in such a climate is to undergo metamorphosis, whereupon the academic adopts the ‘weightless elegance’ of that journalistic sphere as its ‘cultured butterfly’.¹ This description seems more appropriate to our century than the one from which it was taken.

* * *

Academics are cultured folk. Their most sophisticated representatives breeze through life exuding the fine tastes for which they are esteemed. And yet, that weightless elegance to which Nietzsche refers is never entirely achieved. As they look to the heavens, throwing aloft great sensibilities, academics also double over in anguish, seeking to connect with the world below. They are increasingly forced by the demands of their immediate environment to respond to the wider instrumental needs of society. Indeed, they experience a form of discomfort here that a spectator familiar with the haughty tones of the old academic may find pleasurable to watch.

* * *

The new injunction: academics will engage with reality, relating to the needs of the present as they are presently defined, speaking even if they have nothing to say.

* * *

Stalking one other and their stakeholders for opportunities to exploit, for angles that will give them the edge, those applying for funding must explain

how they will be of service. Many self-styled progressives see this exposure to a new set of demands as a revolution in how they work. It is viewed as a momentous switch in academic discourse, one that gives voice to others and diminishes the influence of their own, too privileged, position. Progressives like to think they no longer speak from above.

* * *

As academics fall over one another in a display of respectful, cultured and salaried diffidence, they are pushed into the service of, and become subservient to, the existing social order. The university must now promote, support or pursue innovation, and thereby serve the interests of the wider economy. In writing their bids, researchers are encouraged to consider how their work might facilitate 'robust government' or 'private sector strategies to ensure sustainable growth'. In pursuit of wealth and opportunity, researchers adopt the demeanour of mineral prospectors in search of untapped opportunities, wading in the filth of those whose contents they have already exploited.

* * *

A good research project may promote resilience, or increase understanding between disconnected communities. It might act as a minor palliative, improving community well-being through its support of voluntary action or social enterprise. Good research always asks itself in advance how it can meet the needs of its users and beneficiaries. It identifies who those beneficiaries are likely to be and explains how they are likely to benefit. It justifies itself as a public good, using whatever language of social need may be current at the time. In effect, good research explains how it will build for the future *without offending the present*. Indeed, the futures imagined are nothing but more robust versions of the present. What this disallows, of course, is the possibility of objecting to the entire discourse within which contemporary needs are set. As academics chase each other about in ever-widening arcs across departments, faculties and institutions in search of the next big research project grant, they lose the protection of an earlier, more monastic form of existence. This way of life, one that unashamedly embraced its practices of seclusion, was able to stand aside and disregard the instrumentalities of the day. The old academic was deluded, of course, in claiming that his processes and utterances escaped the effects of power. And yet, the minor protections he did experience allowed the possibility of dissent.²

* * *

To say that this book was written whilst wearing a cassock, or some other vestment that distinguishes me as separate from society, and superior to

you, would be misleading. And yet, in a marginal sense, this is a monastic exercise; it is an exercise in personal detachment. This book is the product of my desire for a different relation to the present.

* * *

The various forces of examination can be observed operating behind the normative orders I describe above. They define the relations we adopt with one another and codify how we relate to ourselves. Broadly conceived, examination forms the subject matter of this book, for which I offer a critique. This is a critique of examination, I might add. But that would be padding it out.

* * *

I hope you will be patient, and understand that it would be premature of me, at this point, in this preface, to give you my argument. 'Here it is,' I would say. I would, perhaps, denounce the global spread of this machinery, and declare us largely captive to a constraint without clear definition, to a force that we feel abstractly and cannot precisely locate.

To denounce examination in this way, from the outset, would be a mistake. Examination is not so easily grasped, and so our analysis would lack sufficient bite. We would cast about looking for conceptual resources, hoping to inflict some form of incision – to offer a critique even – and in doing so we would resort to the most tired metaphors. Critics of examination are, typically, all too eager to denounce its machine-like qualities and thereby contrast it with more holistic conceptions of what it means to be 'human'. Examination is portrayed as instrumental and reductive. We are portrayed as its prisoners, hoping for freedom. If only its mechanisms could be lifted, if only we could free ourselves from it... But to lift examination away, as if it were a great boulder, is impossible. We cannot separate ourselves from it, however Herculean the effort; examination will not come away without part of us attached. Examination has come to shape an entire set of perceptions. It conditions how we relate to ourselves, how we relate to one another and how we relate to our present. It declares what it means to be human; it defines how we understand human worth. It clarifies those human features that merit protection; it defines what should be celebrated or promoted, and what can be ignored, reformed or removed. For reasons such as these, examination cannot be simply lifted away. Social existence is in its thrall, and this book is no exception, having itself been written under a shadow. But examination is no simple monolith either. At any one time it is distributed across a whole series of arrangements, as a shifting set of functions. To grasp the significance of examination, we must pursue it in all its diffusion. Its features are layered across various sediments, which are the residues of

former arrangements. A critique of examination must, therefore, adopt an historical line of enquiry. The examination of human worth and mapping of its social distribution has a past worth visiting. Examination has taken different forms and performed different roles in society. Human worth has been appraised differently throughout time, to a variety of purposes and variously nefarious ends. Examination and human merit: these two ideas are not timeless, nor are they universal. And yet, despite the profound contingency of examination, despite its distributed nature, examination has come to feel universal, inescapable. It has come to resemble a monolith.

* * *

At his trial more than two millennia ago, Socrates preferred to die than to live without examination. 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' he said.³ Hence, according to legend, Socrates decided against flight and embraced his execution. We give Socrates too much credit, of course.⁴ Still, this ancient story allows us to picture how today the scenario has reversed: in late modernity we struggle to *avoid* the unexamined life that Socrates seemingly refused to do without. That life, free from intrusion, free from examination, is no longer available to us. We are all examined now.

It seems odd that the site from which the examined life was *defended* from attack (a site once occupied by the solitary figure of Socrates) has since been crowded out by its champions. This is despite the global spread of examination, despite the fact that examination is now an inescapable fact of our lives. A crowded rampart has replaced the position once occupied by the solitary philosopher. This rampart is crammed with well-meaning individuals, all seeking to defend the examined life they now applaud. Philosophers were long ago cast aside by what became a rising horde of professors, eager to take up their chairs. Today, academics situate themselves at the vanguard (a somewhat oddly dressed vanguard, it has to be said), as they collectively shuffle forward under the banner of the examined life for which they presume to fight. It is assumed that the examined life is synonymous with the academy, so much so that, when the university is attacked, the fate of examined life is automatically associated with its future.⁵ Its beleaguered employees are called upon to defend its reputation, the reputation of an establishment that is devoted (or so one is told) to the examined life, to a labour of learning and reflection.

* * *

My argument – in which I suggest that it has become increasingly difficult to avoid the examined life many in academia seek to defend – is easily attacked. I appear to be confusing two versions of what it means 'to examine'. I should, therefore, be explicit in saying that I *deliberately conflate* the examined life, in the high-minded Socratic sense, with examination in the mechanistic

and lowly everyday sense of the word. My claim is that these two ‘varieties’ function together in the construction of docile subjects. As institutional sites of examination, universities are culpable in this venture, in a project that renders subjectivity open to the inquisitor. It is structurally absurd that members of these institutions should be encouraged to endorse the examined life and defend it from attack. Employees of educational institutions do not only serve as agents to examination; they also find themselves subject to its strictures. We are all at the receiving end one way or another; we are all impaled upon it. Admittedly, the nature of our discomfort varies according to our position, where we are each transfixed in a manner that depends on the resplendence of our dress. Upon graduation, those who don an academic cap and medieval cloak experience one of the more pleasurable thrusts that examination has to offer.

* * *

I am reminded of a childhood story once told to me at school. It concerns a boy seated in a large examination hall. In a fit of depression the boy inserted a sharpened pencil up each nostril and, so prepared, thrust his head downwards upon the desk. Presumably he died. I would think of him, whoever he was, when taking my examinations. Clearly, for that examinee, the examined life was *not* worth living.

* * *

During my twenties I experienced an infrequent but recurring nightmare. Whilst occupying this dream state, I would find myself back at school about to sit a Pure Mathematics examination completely unprepared. Upon waking I would remind myself, to some considerable relief, that the examination in question was long ago.

Now I have reached my thirties, the scenario has shifted. From within the recurring dream I am able to remind myself with pleasure that I hold a university degree, and that this degree renders all prior examinations superfluous. I have been elevated, educationally, and sleep a little higher.

* * *

The sensation returns in other contexts. When passing through airport security I experience a familiar discomfort, the discomfort of him who is being examined.

* * *

If I were to sit another formal examination in a hall of parallel desks, this would be the script I should like to return. It would be a numbered essay,

divided into two, five, ten, 15 and 30-mark answers that disregard completely the questions my examiner poses.

* * *

The examination halls I once attended were invariably large, and yet they were intensely constricting in their effects. The aisles resembled those of the church, and the invigilator's steps would resonate just as well in a prison ward, or so I imagined. During the season, but long after my own graduation, I returned to the hall with which I am most familiar, seeking a picture for this book. The chief invigilator flatly denied access, though the scripts were not yet laid out and little, if anything, remained for him to conceal.

* * *

In the airport departure lounge I look at us standing in line, having emptied our nearby seats. We are lining up to board the plane even though the departure gates have not yet opened and will not open for some time. Where is it, I wonder, that we learn to behave as cattle, to submit ourselves to this social ritual as we collectively respond to its externally set, internally processed demands? We are all anxious, of course. There are no allocated seats on board.

* * *

Nietzsche argued that in other respects we are not bovine enough.⁶ The world is not immediately apparent to our senses, and writing does not immediately reveal the world it describes. Understanding is a matter of interpretation. This takes time, and so we must learn to ruminate.

This text is an exercise in rumination. It is based on the suspicion that in responding to the urgent demands of everyday politics – with a heartfelt desire to reveal injustices, break down inequities, unearth corruption, prevent harm and so on – we already presume too much. Here the commitments of the politically engaged can function as a diversion. The urgency of conventional politics distracts us from the realisation – a product of rumination – that the very frameworks of the problems within which we live, within which we experience the dilemmas of the day, must also be approached, questioned and torn apart. For that reason, and to follow Nietzsche, I write ‘neither usefully nor pleasantly’⁷ for those who are overly wedded to the present.

I Bodies

On Progress

I work in a building once occupied by architects. I am told they designed radio telescopes for receiving messages from outer space. It goes without saying that today our concerns are more immediate.

* * *

At its inception more than a century ago, the Department of Education that now employs me could boast the following equipment:

The Department is equipped with the apparatus of a small pedagogical research laboratory, including a Hipp Chronoscope, Macdougall's Attention Machine, Rauschberg's Association and Memory Apparatus, Netschajef's Reaction Time Apparatus, Ebbinghaus Memory Apparatus, Jacquet's Sphymograph, Romer's Voice Key, Minnemann's Card Changing Apparatus, Wundt's Tachistoscope, Wundt's Control Hammer, Kymograph, &c., &c.¹

In a school on the outskirts of the city similar devices reappear. A small girl stands about to be photographed, positioned on a weighing machine for the shot.² She peers at the camera whilst her teacher attends to the balances. Her head cocked to one side, and her face entirely blank, this photographic record tells us little of what was going on inside.

* * *

Measuring the child in 1911 was a physical activity by which features such as weight and height were collected and noted down. Examination of the mind in abstraction from the body was rare. As a technique, the mental test was still in its infancy and generally depended upon physical tricks, such as tests of reaction time, that were later found to correlate poorly with subjective impressions of intelligence. This would soon change. Within a mere

decade another type of test became common, one that would not depend on this circus of tricks. It became known as the intelligence or IQ test. A hundred years on this form of mental assessment is now so old that its use has become unremarkable. Today all young minds are routinely extracted, quantified and subjected to the language of statistical estimation. This form of extraction, a process by which the child is dissected and then reconstructed, has become entirely banal.

* * *

Children are today surrounded by the chatter of statistical work, a language informed by practices of assessment that are laced throughout schooling and its surrounding activities. Convention dictates that such extractions are part of a neutral process or, at least, that they should aspire to technical neutrality. This is the first denial of power.

Accordingly, knowledge of the child must be separated from the effects of bias; it must be objective, correct and reliable. If an assessment bias of some sort is discovered, it must be removed. This scientific procedure is governed by an explicit set of principles that have been rationally agreed. It is the product of a vast industry of professionals and their expert pronouncements. Examination must have an even and regular appearance; it should be without blemish. There is a sense of fairness and decency that comes with carefully designed, carefully administered assessment, or so we are encouraged to feel. This resides in its scientific, non-arbitrary, incorruptible technique.

Those critics who rightly claim that bias remains, who doggedly persist in searching it out, do not escape from the conceptual frame they appear to challenge. However shrill they become in their objections and denunciations, their objections still issue from within the terms of this debate: they speak in the language of bias and fairness. The framework of examination thereby remains intact, and is perhaps also a little reinforced.

* * *

Some educators seek to reject scientific measurement in its entirety. They hope to escape its assumptions concerning the nature of the learner or the nature and purpose of education more generally. As if their will to escape were enough!

Others try, more humbly, to diminish its effects. They promote our recognition of the whole child, of a human presence that must be respected, that must remain uncut, un-extracted. The individual learner ought to be accommodated in terms of his or her own unique completeness. We do violence to the child, they say, if we pare things down to the narrow language of a statistical judiciary. Believing that more humane forms of assessment are possible, that they are already on the horizon if only we were prepared to

travel, those of this persuasion have developed other, rival techniques for appreciating the child. These practical innovations are, though, issued from a position of rivalry that is more apparent than real.

* * *

For those who reject the dominion of scientific measurement, grades and ranks are diligently avoided in favour of individual recommendations and constructive advice. The child is encouraged to avoid comparison with others and to focus on the process of learning. The key, it seems, is to avoid looking elsewhere for guidance or for reason to blame. One must focus on the self in order to celebrate the self and the unique developmental stage this self has reached. There are no generalisations, no universals against which the learner can be compared, and then ranked and judged. Each moment is its own. As such the ownership of each moment cannot be disputed; it is the learner's to possess. The learner must learn to take responsibility for that temporal slice, to diagnose it, and to deliver him or herself from it towards the next incomparable step of learning. This leads to a perverse situation in which 'there is no longer anything the self can hold on to, other than itself'.³ Despite the surrounding warmth of feeling, the child is rendered alone. Examination becomes a process of extreme personalisation that functions *almost* 'like an amputation'.⁴

* * *

Extreme personalisation does not create selves that are perfectly atomised. These selves are not entirely cut off from one another. It remains true that 'no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations'.⁵ What *has* changed, however, is that the self in question increasingly sits within a fabric of relations designed to *fold back* on the self, to refer back to each self in carefully individuated terms. This disguises the operations of a malevolent power, obscuring a set of relations that forms the wider structure of feeling.

* * *

The framework within which the individual is constructed remains hidden from view. In this way, social amputation operates as an insidious divider. From the perspective of its supporters this tradition of humanised assessment looks very different, of course. It has all but divorced itself from the deleterious effects of power, they feel. Their methods have been designed, quite deliberately to operate without bias and certainly without violence. Their pedagogy is presented as self-evident and neutral ('it is just the way we all learn'). And the experience of assessment and learning that it promotes is certainly intended to feel nothing like amputation! The child must be

kept whole, that is their basic tenet; the whole child is their aim and object. After all, these educators hold to higher principles; their activities are geared towards the flourishing of all. As with their rival (the statistical tradition), there is repeated here an insistence on neutrality, on the absence of power. This is the second denial.

* * *

There is a third denial of power that is associated with the examination of human worth. One stumbles across it frequently. I encountered it when overhearing an educator in conversation with a cynic. Actually I was part of the discussion, though I was experiencing one of those 'little touches of solitude' to which I am susceptible.⁶

The teacher was describing a scheme he had in mind to improve the prospects of state school pupils. The situation the teacher wished to confront is a familiar one: children of those parents who are able and willing to afford them a private education have a greater chance of making it to the country's elite universities. In these high-blown institutions, state school pupils are still, as a group, under-represented. The scheme he described was based on a simple hypothesis: children of the state are disadvantaged, he said, because they perform less well at interview. The proposed intervention follows naturally enough: to offer state school pupils mock interviews as a form of preparation.

The cynic poured scorn on the entire plan as you might expect: the system is already rigged, he said. It is hopeless to believe that a little interview technique could overturn an entire social edifice that is marred by injustices and systemic biases. If you are born poor you die poor; if you are born rich you die rich: the elites have ways and means of maintaining their advantage. The teacher agreed wholeheartedly, but then disavowed what he had just admitted. 'You are right', he said, '*but I just can't allow it.*' That, for me, was the crux of the matter: in all practical concerns the teacher was compelled to hold on to the illusion of duly awarded merit, otherwise where would that leave his scheme, and indeed his profession?

The details of the plan were also significant in their own way. The idea was to invite carefully selected 'strangers' to the school. This was based on the assumption that the true interview (the interview without bias) is an encounter with strangers. Leaving aside the elementary point that some strangers are stranger than others (the private school pupil may find the strangers on the interview panel more familiar than the state school pupil), there was something deeply ironic about this situation. Schools commence by telling their pupils: 'Never speak to strangers!' and finish with the concern that their pupils have lost the ability to do so.

* * *

Though there is plenty of cause for cynicism (it's all rigged, and so on), we do nevertheless reassure ourselves that privilege is no longer *publicly* supportable. In the liberal West, to bring attention to someone's privilege is to offer that person an insult. The implication, clearly enough, is that the person in question would have been unable to succeed on merit alone and does not deserve our recognition. Noble birth may continue to bring its hidden advantages, but these conveyances are said to be on the wane. Nepotism – the practice whereby those with power or influence favour relatives and friends – is no longer publicly defensible. It follows the fate of its precursor, the arrangement of judicious marriages, which has long been a topic of ridicule.⁷ Though we admit that covert systems, systems that convey undue advantage, are still very much in existence – in which the middle classes are perhaps now the most adept game players in town – most people gaming the system today would be embarrassed to admit foul play. The cynicism that afflicts us is not quite that well set.⁸ If we cynically 'buy' our way to a qualification or position, we still feel compelled to conceal what we have done. The felt need for concealment here can be taken as a mark of progress, progressives believe. This sense of shame rather proves the point from the perspective of the social optimist: meritocracy has become an unquestionable good.

* * *

It is commonly believed that we live in a meritocracy. The advocates of this faith remind themselves that power was once a brazen, openly patriarchal and unashamedly naked force. They flatter themselves with the idea that the blatant interventions of patronage have been largely replaced by scientific measurement and democratic correction, by tools providing better estimates of capability than birth, blood or noble origin ever could. Though some critics still complain of a continued class, gender or race bias in assessment, I would argue that their complaints are in a sense superficial. Their criticisms issue from, circulate through and are deposited back within the same system of meritocratic assumptions.

More baldly put, one might say that this entire debate finds itself located within a narrative of Western advance. According to this narrative, progress in the production of knowledge – including knowledge gained from examination – translates more or less directly into advances of justice, fairness and liberty. From this perspective, examination, and the knowledge it produces, needs only further refinement and better implementation as we work towards greater equality of opportunity through more perfected meritocratic techniques. Education systems are viewed as having become more transparent and more accountable through the production of knowledge about and within them. This transparency will, it is believed, overthrow

those systems of power that are said to multiply when knowledge is thin and where the mechanisms of social life remain hidden from view. In such an educational context, with the effects of power largely 'removed', ability has, for the first time in history, a genuine chance to triumph over background and hence over power. Ability takes precedence over the influence of one's connections, of strings pulled in the shadows. Those who accept this progressive narrative flatter themselves that, even though imperfections remain, the aspiration to achieve perfected meritocratic order is firmly embedded.

* * *

As a regulating idea, meritocracy serves to structure and condition perception. In providing the framework upon which judgements are made, it functions as if it were timeless. Meritocracy is one of those moral touchstones many believe can be invoked without reasonable objection to judge social existence. The meritocratic ideal fulfils an essential role in those societies that have endured the combined onslaught of modernity and secularism, that are marked by the defeat of religious authority, and, as a result, no longer order their perception according to the metaphysical logic of a divine order. More earthly principles are now depended upon to regulate lived experience. It is here that the principle of meritocracy – a delicate but enduring concoction – has become the primary operator for a secular order.

* * *

In his commentary on Nietzsche,⁹ Henry Staten contrasts the Christian order of discourse – which attempts 'to recuperate the suffering of history by projecting a divine plan that assigns it a reason now and a recompense later' – to the secularised narrative of a latter-day liberal humanism. Unable to cope with the possibility that there is no single explanation for the accumulated disorder of history – only the brute fact of that 'overwhelming spectacle of cruelty, stupidity and suffering' – left liberals and humanists find a secular replacement for the Christian precursor.¹⁰ According to their revised understanding, 'all those lives ground up in the machine of history are assigned an intelligible role as victims of oppression and injustice'. This is the 'implicit teleology' of modern self-understanding, which 'gives form and meaning to the rest of history'. From their elevated perspective extends an 'invisible line of rectitude' used to judge human existence, a line of rectitude that would presumably continue to traverse history 'even though [its originating] community of belief may cease to exist'.¹¹ It is a position of self-professed pre-eminence that allows those who identify with it to stand outside history and act

as supreme arbitrators, like gods, judging all societies alike according to their universal criteria. These defenders of our common humanity 'cannot accept', as John Gray argues, 'that a world in which their liberal ideals are constantly mocked does not secretly revere them'.¹² Like me, they sleep a little higher, and yet they refuse to wake up. Perhaps they should be permitted this temporal respite, as a prisoner might be allowed to rest on the way to the gallows. Eventually, though, liberals and humanists alike must leave this dream state and learn to admit the fragile foundations of their self-professed superiority.

The principle of meritocracy can be found within the ailing foundations of their humanistic tradition. It is remarkable, in fact, that such a fragile idea has been and still is used in this way, functioning as a key line of rectitude or 'sliver of light',¹³ which somehow entitles those who possess it to illuminate and appraise the past, present and future alike. According to this singular line, a just society will be, amongst other things, a meritocratic one, in which meritocracy provides the scale against which social progress is judged. More advanced societies are deemed to be those that are more meritocratic. They make fewer decisions based on prejudice and extend opportunity further. Meritocracy is also used as a measure of corruption, whereby corrupt societies or corrupt institutions are thought to be those that violate the formula: merit = ability + effort. Meritocratic societies are open and fair; non-meritocratic ones are obscure and underhand. The conclusion is familiar; meritocracies are places where power is in retreat.

* * *

As a myth, meritocracy acts to support and legitimate unequal societies.¹⁴ Whilst meritocracy is a comparatively recent social invention with no claim to universality, it performs an important and seemingly indestructible ideological function. It absorbs displeasure – a bitterness that is the product of inequality – by diffusing it and individuating it within a system that sanctions differential rewards, a system that assigns individuals to unequal economic positions according to their own 'effort' and 'merit'. It sets to work any remaining vexations issuing from those who retain a social conscience by diverting these desires for a different, more equal social order into the pursuit of system neutrality. This sublimation of desire is expressed through the fight against patronage or unfair influence, and through the development and distribution of accounting techniques and traditions of 'unbiased' measurement. It should be noted that, in the context of these earnest campaigns for more justly distributed inequalities, cases of residual nepotism are not as disruptive to the meritocratic ideal as they may at first appear. When individuals or groups are singled out for their unfair privilege,

they serve an important function, reinforcing the principle of meritocracy amongst those who depend upon it to animate their contempt.

* * *

The ubiquity of meritocracy in liberal societies seems unassailable. If circumstances were different, perhaps we could let this spectre alone and allow it to continue as a ponderous, but harmless, preoccupation. But this continued faith in the eternal form of the meritocratic ideal has become embroiled in a scandal of perception, and this scandal has had its victims. Even though meritocracy clearly still exists as a collective ideal, as a *practical administrative project* it has long since been dismissed from the scene of government. It no longer persists in that corporeal form. We nevertheless remain *psychologically attached* to the idea of meritocracy, so much so that we are unable to fully perceive its departure, or take the measure of the system that replaced it. We cannot recognise our period as one in which *disorder* and the *impossibility of fairness* are principles that have been elevated above their opposites and incorporated within governmental technique. The period within which we live is one that exists *after fairness* and *beyond justice*, following a transition that took place largely unremarked. This transition occurred as the children of the late twentieth century learned how to live a life without fairness, as they were prepared for an existence where hope is more instrumental to their lives than the guarantee of justice, as they were schooled in a range of personal strategies and dispositions necessary for a docile and productive existence within a deliberately unsystematic social order.

Meritocracy, today, bears little resemblance to its former self, even though many resolutely hold on to its earlier definition; it has been transformed in spite of the fact that many are still preoccupied with its accompanying mission to eradicate power by removing the effects of unfair influence. A fissure has opened up between an abstract principle of justice and a social project within which reason has been suspended. This void now engulfs all well-meaning efforts oriented towards inclusion, fair opportunity and just desert. Within this space, which remains hidden from view (as does a quarry beyond the crest of a hill), machinations of government have been able to extend and multiply, adjusting and furthering their capacity to quell dissent.

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False assumptions concerning the absence of power in scientific assessment, the benign intent of its rival anti-numerical approach and the universalism of the meritocratic ideal, were culpable in a wider transformation through which we entered this life beyond fairness. We cannot even complain that fairness is absent, for this complaint has been emptied of meaning. A belief

in progress and an abstract faith in the institutions of liberalism and democracy also served to obscure the many 'dark sides' of power. Profoundly misguided in our commitments and in our estimates of the chief concerns of the day, many of us arrived at our current predicament staring intently in the wrong direction.

* * *

For those who maintain that it is time to inaugurate a resistance, perhaps even a collective refusal, the first step is to insist that power is *never* in retreat. Violence continues without interruption.

Modern Examination

To speak of the *history of examination* makes little sense. As a concept, examination is neither bland nor universal enough for such a history to be written. It cannot stretch across time gathering together all related events as their collecting term. Like the history it confronts, this is an unstable concept. It is, moreover, insufficiently distinct from close associates such as ‘assessment’.

At times the words *assessment* and *examination* can be used almost synonymously. At others they drift apart. Whilst examination is often used to refer to the formal process by which candidates are judged for a particular qualification or post, assessment has a more general meaning and can refer to informal as well as formal activities.

There are other differences. In medieval alchemy, examination refers to the attempt to test or assay a precious metal in order to determine its purity. It is also associated with close scrutiny or investigation by inspection in order to establish the truth or qualities of an object, statement or calculation. Finally, examination refers to the interrogation of a person in order to determine his or her state of mind, knowledge or capacity. Assessment, by contrast, has been associated with the determination of a fine, charge or tax. It is also linked to the valuation of property. Whilst examination in its various uses is about inspection and truth, assessment adds to this the idea of distribution, remuneration and desert. Depending on my focus, I will switch terms. This chapter refers chiefly to examination, dealing as it does with the history of a device used to generate truth through inspection. Later chapters are concerned more directly with assessment: they investigate the valuation and distribution of human worth. This switch from examination to assessment is not without consequence, reflecting as it does a diminishing concern for truth.

* * *

In the West, two distinct traditions of examination can be identified, these being modern examination and its medieval precursor. Both were brought into being as institutional devices, assisting those institutions in games of subjugation.

Arriving during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in Europe, medieval examination beat the Bubonic Plague by a century. This is not to boast on behalf of examination; it merely sets a scene. The pandemic was certainly a fearsome episode in human history, and yet there was a far more dangerous sickness already endemic in 1348 that is to be feared precisely because we do not experience it as such.

The plague arrived, so they say, on merchant ships upon which Oriental rats and their fleas hitched a ride. Examination has similar intercontinental connections, but we will remain in the West along with the fleas. Here we commonly perceive those who existed before medieval examination, and

certainly those who existed before modern examination, as comparatively healthy. The ancients were particularly so; at least, this is how the story goes, where the hardy ancestor *par excellence* would be Socrates.

The medievalist Charles Haskins once quipped that a 'great teacher like Socrates gave no diplomas; if a modern student sat at his feet for three months, he would demand a certificate, something tangible and external to show for it'.¹⁵ Unlike Socrates' companions, who were the victims of Socratic dialogue, modern students are the victims of institutional life, having been so formed that they cannot but share the expectations of organised education. 'Only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries', Haskins continues, 'do there emerge in the world those features of organised education with which we are most familiar, all that machinery of instruction represented by faculties and colleges and courses of study, examinations and commencements and academic degrees.'¹⁶

* * *

Almost 900 years ago, the first medieval universities were established, their early development being closely associated with a certain pre-modern ritual of examination. Formal medieval education was a minority privilege. The favoured few entered a system that we may struggle to understand in retrospect because it failed to employ many of those features that we associate with formal education today. There were few graduated steps in the subjects taught. These subjects were not broken down into discrete units and then ordered into a hierarchy of difficulty from the most elementary components to the most difficult concepts. Also absent was the significance we now ascribe to age. A variety of ages were taught together.¹⁷ So, whilst the life of a medieval student can be divided into three main phases, these divisions did not contain a graded hierarchy of steps and they are not best represented by age.

Roughly, then, the elite students of the first phase were called *scholars*. Four or more years were spent listening to lectures. These were delivered from a list of prescribed texts, with the number of times each text should be heard being defined in advance: 'Hard, close drill on a few well-thumbed books was the rule.'¹⁸ But the required books were rare, and so the education was largely an oral one, divided between ordinary lectures that were delivered by masters and cursory lectures that were given by bachelors. The former expounded the text, whilst the latter offered little more than a running commentary on it. Lectures were augmented by disputations, in which the master would resolve any difficulties raised with respect to an authoritative text. A scholar would attend the disputations of his master for two years or so, during which period he would respond to questions posed by the master and receive training in textual reconciliation.

The second phase in the student's career was that of *bachelor*, a status that had been borrowed from the terminology of the Guilds, that is, a candidate for Mastership. The transition from scholar to bachelor was known as the determination, and eligibility for this step was ascertained through a series of preliminary examinations, called 'responcions'. The candidate and his master were then asked to swear an oath that the former had fulfilled the requirements, including attendance at the prescribed lectures. Determination itself involved the candidate holding a series of public disputations during Lent. Having successfully determined, the bachelor resumed attendance at his master's lectures. He was required to take part in further disputations over the next year and take on some teaching responsibilities by delivering a course of cursory lectures.

The next objective was to become a *master*. After several more years of study and teaching, the bachelor of promise reached the process of inception, through which admission could be gained to the masters' guild. The candidate would hold an inaugural lecture together with a disputation, following which there was a banquet held at the inceptor's expense.

* * *

All these examinations, commencements and academic degrees may sound rather tedious.¹⁹ On those occasions when I find myself subjected to some ceremony or other, either participating in the ritual or standing by, I like to think that we would all rather be elsewhere. Those who find themselves fired up by such events exhibit, for me, the surface traits of a more troubling inclination.

It is with little pleasure that I spend effort recounting long-dead rituals, such as those detailed above. It would be far more entertaining, perhaps, to explore what medieval students got up to in their spare time. But the ceremonial particulars are important, and we should not allow our gaze to follow that of the wayward student. These events served a wider, moral purpose. At the very least, candidates could be rejected for inappropriate behaviour. Gambling and taking part in a knife-fight with local tailors were both recorded as reasons for rejection. Paying undue attention to the solemnity of the event itself was another reason for dismissal. In fifteenth-century Vienna one candidate made the unforgivable mistake of nipping out to see an execution during the examination – an irresistible spectacle, one assumes.²⁰ The threat of rejection for inappropriate behaviour was, nevertheless, only a blunt device for the regulation of personal conduct. The ceremonies themselves, these sites of medieval examination, were far more intricate in their effects as moral devices. To understand how they worked we must appreciate the regime of truth within which the medieval scholar was confined.

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