Texts, Society, and Time

or, Why it Helps to Read Great Books

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Let me begin by quoting a few lines from a speech that was given by Macaulay in 1831. Listen closely and try to keep in mind what he says. I am not going to comment on it now, but I shall return to it at the end of this lecture. Here is what he said: "It is now time for us to pay a decent, a rational, a manly reverence to our ancestors, not by superstitiously

[1] This is a revised version of a lecture given at the second annual conference of the Association for Core Texts and Courses in Philadelphia in April 1996. I have changed a few phrases and added a few references, but on the whole I thought it best to keep the text as close as possible to the form in which I actually delivered it. I would like to thank Stephen Zelnick and J. Scott Lee for their invitation to speak to ACTC, and the audience for its gracious response. I would especially like to thank Jane Calvert for her help in getting this lecture into shape, and Bob Rosen for suggesting a few felicitous changes.

adhering to what they, in other circumstances, did, but by doing what they, in our circumstances, would have done."[2]

I have been asked to speak about core texts in the social sciences.[3] That is a big task. I shall try to make it more manageable by dividing it into three parts. The first of these is about baseball.

Yes, that is exactly what I said: baseball. Baseball is useful because I can assume that most of you are familiar with it. So I do not need to waste any time on describing it, but can go straight to the reason why it is relevant to my purpose. And the reason is that baseball consists of a certain group of people behaving according to certain rules.

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[2] Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Speech on Parliamentary Reform (2 March 1831)," in: Jan Goldstein and John W. Boyer, eds. Nineteenth-Century Europe: Liberalism and Its Critics, University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization, vol. 8 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) pp. 41-54, here p. 47. The speech was given during the parliamentary debates leading to the great reform of 1832 by which the electorate of the United Kingdom was increased from less than 500,000 to more than 800,000.

[3] There is something bogus about all labels, but especially about labels like "core texts", "great books", "the classics", and so on. After all, if there is anything that typifies "great books", it is that they are original, and they could hardly be original if they were all alike. Labeling them, however, even if it refers to a praiseworthy quality such as their "greatness", implies that in fact they are all alike. Labeling thus is just about the greatest injustice one can do them. It is strange to see how regularly some of their most outspoken partisans do not hesitate to inflict upon them an indignity so contrary to their spirit.

A certain group of people behaving according to certain rules may seem to be a very simple thing, but it has complicated consequences. For example, it divides human beings into two groups: those who play baseball, and those who do not. Baseball players are different from other people, and the difference manifests itself in two basic ways. On the one hand, all of them differ equally from all of us, because all of them are baseball players, and all of us are not. On the other hand, they also differ from each other. Some players are good at throwing. You put those on the mound and call them pitcher. Others are good at catching. You put those behind the plate and call them catcher. Some are not good enough to play in the major leagues. You put those in the minor leagues. And so on.

You might think that you cannot combine equality with difference. But baseball proves that this is not so. The equality that unites all baseball players with each other goes quite happily together with the differences that divide shortstops from first basemen and pitchers from catchers, not to mention the difference that separates all of us from all of them. In baseball, in other words, the relationship between equality and difference is not exclusive but complementary.

Something similar can be said about freedom and obedience in relation to baseball. On the one hand, baseball players have the freedom to do things that other people do not do: they get to play ball, they may even get to play it

in Yankee Stadium, and they travel a lot. On the other hand, they suffer real limitations upon their freedom. For example, they are not allowed to play with an inflated ball that is pointed at both ends, nor are they allowed to tackle members of the opposing team. The rest of us are free to do those things. But not baseball players, for the simple reason that they would not be baseball players if they did. They would be football players. Baseball players must play according to the rules of baseball, and the rules of baseball happen to prohibit the use of inflated balls that are pointed at both ends quite effectively and, somewhat less effectively, the tackling of other players. Baseball players thus differ from the rest of us, not only by a complementary package of equality and difference, but also by a peculiar combination of obedience and freedom: obedience to rules that we do not need to obey and freedom to do things that we do not get to do.

The most important consequence that follows from the existence of a group of people behaving according to certain rules, however, is a distinction between two fundamentally different kinds of conflict. One is conflict according to those rules, and the other is conflict about those rules.

Conflict according to the rules is what baseball is all about. The game, after all, consists of teams competing with each other for victory. And there is a person to make sure that the rules will not be violated. He is called the umpire. Conflict about the rules, on the other hand, arises when the

rules themselves are in dispute -- for example, whether pitchers should be allowed to have another player take their place when it is their turn to bat. This kind of conflict is fundamentally different from the first, because it cannot be settled by playing the game or by consulting the umpires. It is settled by stepping out of the game and deliberating on the reasons for whichever rule is in dispute. The difference is absolutely crucial. Conflict according to the rules is settled by doing what you are supposed to do as a baseball player: play the game. Conflict about the rules is settled by stopping what you are supposed to do as a baseball player and reflecting on the rules of the game instead.

There are many other consequences that follow from the existence of a group of people behaving according to certain rules. But this is enough to clarify that such consequences can be problematic. Someone in a peculiar frame of mind might very well object to the exclusive line that divides baseball players from the rest of us, to the differences by which they are separated from each other, to the special freedom that they enjoy, and to the strict obedience they are expected to render to the rules. Most of us do not object. We put up with those consequences because they are necessary to solve the fundamental problem of baseball. And the fundamental problem of baseball, of course, is to win according to the rules.

By now it has probably occurred to you why I have been talking about baseball at such length. Baseball is an analogy

for society, and society is the subject of the second part of this lecture.

Society, like baseball, consists of a certain group of people who obey certain rules. Hence baseball and society have a lot in common. For example, members of a given society are all equal in that they belong to that particular society and are divided from members of other societies. On the other hand, they are also divided from each other by many differences between them. These differences are determined quite differently in different societies depending, for example, on whether or not a given society thinks personal status is more important than personal merit, or wealth more important than knowledge, or athletic ability more important than academic credentials. But whatever the criterion, there is a real hierarchy in every society, just as there is in baseball.

Again, members of one society enjoy certain freedoms that are denied to the members of others. Citizens of the United States of America, for example, enjoy the right to put themselves up for election as president, such as it is. Those who are not American citizens do not have that right. In return the same citizens are expected to obey certain rules that are similarly unique to the United States of America, for example, the rule that obliges them to deal with the Internal Revenue Service. And there is also the distinction between conflict according to the rules and conflict about the rules. Conflict according to the rules is what society is

all about: in society you try to get ahead, fair and square. Conflict about the rules, on the other hand, occurs, when the members of society disagree about the justice of the rules according to which they are expected to conduct themselves. And again, that conflict is not settled by doing what society is all about, but by consulting an oracle, asking the advice of the elders, or engaging in public debate, to mention three of the most popular things that people like to do in order to settle conflict about the rules.

You might therefore conclude that the fundamental problem of society is like the fundamental problem of baseball. In that case the fundamental problem of society would be how to get ahead according to the rules.

If that were all, the fundamental problem of society could be solved by means quite similar to those we use for baseball: a system of rules, a combination of equality and difference, a mixture of obedience and freedom, reflection upon the rules, umpires, and so on. That would be difficult enough. People always test the limits of the rules, because that way they have a better chance to win. Some of them even break the rules, in baseball no less than in society. Still, if that were all, the difficulties that would have to be mastered in order to solve the fundamental problem of society would only be practical. In principle, at least, it should be no more difficult to master them in society by finding the right rules and making sure that people obey them than it is in baseball.

Unfortunately that is not so. For, in spite of everything I may have led you to believe so far, the fact of the matter is that the analogy between baseball and society takes you only so far. Society differs from baseball in some very interesting ways, and the chief reason why I brought up baseball in the first place was to clarify how deep those differences go.

The most obvious difference between society and baseball is that you do not choose to become a member of society. Society is something you are born into. Nobody is born a pitcher, but everybody is born a member of some society. The society may be small, as in the case of a family, and it may be large, as in the case of China. But no matter how large or small, you are invariably born as a member of one. Joining society is not a matter of choice. It may be a matter of chance, of fate, of laws of nature, or even of providence, but it is definitely not a matter of choice.

It is similar with leaving society. True, you can choose to retire from society, just as you can retire from baseball, but it is more difficult. Even hermits belong to society in some way, and the only way to retire from society completely is to die. For all practical purposes society may therefore be defined as a kind of group that you join when you are born and that you leave when you die.

That changes the nature of the game. This particular game is one that you have no choice but to play, whether you like it or not. And the stakes are high. In baseball you play

to win the world series, and you get another chance next year. In society, you play with your life, and you get a single chance. Consequences that are merely potentially objectionable in baseball therefore become actually objectionable in society. Few people complain about the exclusive line that divides baseball players from the rest of us because nobody is forced to become a baseball player in the first place. But there is good reason to complain when people are forced to join a particular society for no other reason than where they were born -- and there is even more reason to complain if they were born to a team that keeps losing.

Moreover, the rules of society are quite unlike those of baseball. For one thing, we do not know exactly where they come from. In baseball we know. The rules of baseball came into this world on "June 19, 1846, when Alexander Cartwright, baseball's James Madison, its foremost constitutionalist, went to Hoboken and organized the first game under rules recognizable as the antecedents of modern baseball."[4] In society we are not sure. Some rules are clearly made by people; the Constitution of the United States of America, for

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[4] Thus George Will, Newsweek, April 1, 1996, p. 78. Given the date of publication, one might suspect an April fool's joke, were George Will not so unlikely to make light of baseball. It is a more serious question whether the origin of the rules of baseball really can be so closely identified with a specific person, time, and place. On that, see note 6 below.

example. Others are clearly made by nature; the rule according to which men and women must cooperate in some fashion in order to produce children, for example. But others are on the borderline, such as the rule that you may not marry your first cousin, or the rule that all human beings are born free and equal. Some people believe that rules like these are made by nature. Other people do not. But nobody really knows for sure.

Another difference between the rules of baseball and society is this: the rules of society are so difficult to know that most of us must play without knowing what they are. That is obvious for babies. They do not know the rules at all, because they have no way of knowing them. But it is just as true for grownups. That is in part because some of the most important rules of society are unwritten, never mind that the penalties for violating them can be very serious indeed. Such is usually the case with the rules having to do with speaking, dressing, and the natural functions, for example. In part it is also because even written rules are difficult to know. I, for example, have never had a chance to read the US Criminal Code cover to cover and I would be surprised if a single person in this room had -- and this in spite of the fact that the US Criminal Code contains only those very few rules that we consider so important as to sanction them by particularly severe penalties.

Most important, the rules of society, written as well as unwritten, are difficult to know because they keep changing.

That is easy enough to observe if you travel. There is nothing like a trip abroad to teach you that things you had always considered to be good and honorable are of little use to you abroad and may even be treated with contempt; baseball, for example. That is one of the reasons why I think travel abroad ought to be one of the most important ingredients in everybody's education. But you do not need to travel in order to have that experience. All you have to do is wait. If you wait long enough, and sometimes that is not long at all, things that you considered indecent and wrong become perfectly normal, even commendable, and things that you considered perfectly normal suddenly become detestable. That is especially clear with changes in the language. We all know that many words and expressions have been banished from polite language even though only a short while ago they may have seemed not only harmless, but even a definite improvement on still older words and expressions. It is no different with some of the more basic rules of justice. The rule according to which people of high social standing ought to be punished more lightly for the same crime than people of low social standing, for example, used to be one of the most deeply respected rules of medieval and early modern Europe, just as it was in many other status-oriented societies -- but it seems quite unacceptable today. And the rule according to which you must be a man in order to vote governed the members of this society (need I remind you?) until 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution gave national

suffrage to women. In short, even if it were possible to know all the written and unwritten rules of society, that knowledge would soon become woefully inadequate.

The single most important difference between society and baseball, however, is not about rules or their origins or the difficulty of knowing them, but about time. Society never stops. There are no intermissions, no off-seasons, no seventh-inning stretches.[5] You play all the time, during every moment of your life, from birth to death. There is no way to stop the game. Hence it is impossible in principle to distinguish conflict according to the rules of society clearly from conflict about the rules of society. In society you can never be sure about the difference between changing the rules and playing the game. You have to deal with both at the same time. In society changing the rules is part of

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[5] In the original version of this lecture, I wrote "sixth-inning stretches." As I was writing, I wondered, were the stretches sixth-inning or seventh-inning? I couldn't remember. I was tired. My reference works failed miserably. Never mind. The audience would spot the mistake, if there was one, and point it out to this naturalized immigrant still only barely conversant with such elementary facts of life, and the immigrant would then be able to use his ignorance as grist for the mills of his lecture. The audience did spot the mistake, as I found out later on, but correct it they did not. I had not reckoned with American politeness. One little example of confusion over rules.

playing the game. Perhaps it is even the most important part.[6]

That is why society comes without umpires. True, we have people like umpires -- an entire judicial system and even a supreme court, and we should be glad that we do. We also have legislative bodies that devote themselves to formulating the best possible rules for society. Such institutions allow us to step outside society in a manner of speaking. But they do so only in a manner of speaking because they are themselves a part of society, not separate from it. The judges who send us to prison or let us go free, the lawyers who defend us or prosecute us, and the senators who represent us are among the very people with whom we play the game. Their presence can reduce, but it cannot abolish, the likelihood that conflict according to the rules will be mixed up with conflict about the rules.

Society, in other words, is a game that is stacked against all players. It is a game that you are forced to

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[6] Actually the difference between baseball and society is hardly as stark as I am making it out to be. The rules of baseball have changed over time, and at least in part they have changed as a result of players' changing practices. Again, as noted above, the origin of the rules of baseball is not nearly as clear as we may think. And who knows, perhaps you can even be born a batter. The difference between baseball and society might thus be a matter of degree after all, not a matter of principle. For the sake of clarity I decided not to pursue this question here. But it is worth stressing that the clarity is deceptive, which is to say: logically sound, but historically misleading.

play, as long as you live, according to rules that you do not know very well and that keep changing on you, without an umpire to turn to. Society is confusing and dangerous. It is confusing, because the rules are unclear. It is dangerous because unclear rules make it likely that conflict will prove impossible to resolve by any other method than that uniquely human form of dispute settlement that we call war.

Imagine a very, very large playing field. Imagine that it is filled with millions of different people. Imagine that each of these people knows one particular kind of game, and that the number of different games is incalculable: not only football, baseball, hockey, basketball, handball, soccer, and so on, but many, many more. Now mix in a lot of children. Imagine that all of these people, including the children, are told to play together. Imagine that they are not allowed to stop at any time until they die and that they are not told which rules they are supposed to follow. Imagine that they are not even supposed to know the rules because the object of the game is to find out what those rules are. Imagine that the only way to find out the rules that they do not know is to play according to the rules that they do know. And imagine finally that the rules they are supposed to find out change with every move they make. If you can imagine all of that, you will have a reasonably accurate picture of the fundamental problem of society.

The fundamental problem of society thus is quite different from the fundamental problem of baseball. It is not

simply how to win according to the rules of the game. It is how to win a game that you do <u>not</u> know by playing a game that you <u>do</u> know.

How can that problem be solved? I do not know the answer to that question, and I have a hunch that it is about as insoluble as the puzzle about that Cretan who is supposed to have said that all Cretans are liars. It does not matter whether you believe him or not. In either case you run into a blatant contradiction. But I do know this. If there is a solution to the fundamental problem of society, it will never be found unless two obstacles are first moved out of the way. One of these obstacles is ignorance of the rules of the game. You are certainly not going to solve the problem by throwing out rules altogether. If the players do not know any rules, they do not even stand a chance of playing a game, much less of winning. The other obstacle is the confusion that stems from identifying too closely with any particular game. All players in society must be prepared to stand above whichever game they happen to be playing. Otherwise they will never recognize that the player who just tackled them is not necessarily an unusually violent baseball player, but may just happen to be an unusually gentle football player.

In the third part of this lecture I should like to persuade you that, apart from travelling abroad, the books we are accustomed to call "core texts" or "great books" are the most effective means we have to remove both of these obstacles. They teach us the rules of many games, and at the

very same time they teach us not to identify with any particular game too closely.

I do not want to spend much time explaining how the great books teach us about the rules of the game. It seems obvious to me that that is precisely what they do, and I will simply assume that it seems obvious to you as well. Books like the Bible, Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, Herodotus' History, Thucydides' Peloponnesian War, Plato's Republic, Aristotle's Politics, Epictetus' Enchiridion, Cicero's On the Commonwealth, Vergil's Aeneid, Tacitus' Annals, St. Augustine's City of God, The Song of Roland, Abelard's History of His Calamities, Thomas Aquinas' Sum of Theology, Machiavelli's Prince, Luther's On Christian Liberty, Calvin's Institutes, Montaigne's Essays, Descartes' Discourse on Method, Hobbes' Leviathan, Locke's Second Treatise of Government, Hume's Enquiry Concerning Principles of Morals, Rousseau's Social Contract, Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, Hegel's Philosophy of History, Tocqueville's Democracy in America, Mill's On Liberty, Marx' Capital, Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals, and Freud's Civilization and its Discontents -- to mention in one breath some of the more familiar titles on the list of great books written in one part of the world -- books like these devote so many pages to specifying, depicting, revealing, analysing, defending, attacking, and otherwise elaborating the rules of society that it seems unnecessary to belabor the point.

Belaboring it might even be counterproductive. For I am not at all sure that ignorance of the rules is the more forbidding of the two obstacles I have just mentioned. Do not misunderstand me. Ignorance of the rules is a serious problem. To my mind it is one of the two chief obstacles that prevent us from getting society to work as we all wish it would. And I am convinced that studying texts like the ones I just mentioned (though not necessarily those particular ones) is one of the best means we have to overcome that obstacle. It may even be, though I doubt it, that ignorance of the rules demands our special attention at the present time because it appears to be growing.

On the other hand, however, I also believe that over the long run of human history the second obstacle has turned out to be far more difficult to overcome. What is astonishing about the human race in general is not at all how little we know about rules, but how much, and how reluctant we are to change our game, even when the rules we know turn out to be as useless as pitching in football or haruspication in the stock exchange. I understand the reluctance. Most of the miracles accomplished by language, writing, and social cooperation would be impossible without obedience to rules. No wonder people are attached to them. But the more deeply they are invested in any particular game, the less likely they will be able to adjust to change. Change, however, is inevitable. From my point of view, therefore, and to quote

Will Rogers, "the problem ain't what people don't know. The problem is what people do know that just ain't so."

The books I have just mentioned thus have another role to play besides removing ignorance of the rules, namely, detaching us from any particular game. Let me distinguish three ways in which they do so.

One is that they invariably confront us with rules that are totally different from our own. That is only natural. Most core texts come from very different times and places. Since society is a matter of rules that change over time, it is only to be expected that the rules embodied in these texts are different from our own. As a result good core texts are invariably shocking -- unless, of course, they have been edited or read in such a way as to conceal how profoundly they conflict with the rules that we cherish.

Take, for example, what Plato said about children (that they ought not know their parents) and marriage (that the ruling men should share their women), what Aristotle said about slavery (that it was natural), what Saint Paul said about impurity (that nothing is impure in itself), and what Moses said to the Levites after they had killed 3,000 worshippers of the Golden Calf at Mount Sinai: "Today you have consecrated yourselves to the Lord completely, because you have turned each against his own son and his own brother

and so have this day brought a blessing upon yourselves."[7] My students are quite properly shocked when they hear such things.[8] For many of them it is the first time that they have the slightest inkling of the possibility that their notions of right and wrong are not altogether obvious, that the founding father of western philosophy regarded the existence of families as a threat to the common good, and that God might want his followers to kill immediate members of their family. That shock must be handled with tact, but it must not be avoided because it is extremely valuable. It wakes you up. It helps you to recognize that good people may believe shocking things, that books with which you may have been taught to identify do not simply confirm whatever you happen to believe, and that books you may have ignored or rejected

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[7] See, respectively, Plato, Republic, 457c-d; Aristotle, Politics, 1254a-1255b; Paul's Letter to the Romans, 14:14; Exodus 32:29 (quoted from the New English Bible, Oxford Study edition).

[8] They are even more shocked when they read what Heloise, by common consent one of the most deeply learned and highly respected abbesses of twelfth-century Europe, wrote to Abbot Abelard about love and marriage: "God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress but your whore." See "Letter of Heloise to Abelard (1130s)," in: Julius Kirshner and Karl F. Morrison, eds. Medieval Europe, University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 219-22, here p. 220. Examples are easy to multiply.

can offer unexpected support for your convictions. It thus also prepares you for the possibility that whatever you happen to believe might quite possibly be shocking to someone else.

In the second place, core texts contradict each other. That is another perfectly natural consequence of the fact that they come from different times and places. It is, after all, unlikely that texts from different times and places would disagree with the convictions of our time and place, and only those of our time and place. Nonetheless it is worth stressing that it is quite simply impossible to reconcile, for example, what St. Augustine says about the legitimate use of force against dissenters with what John Locke says about the same subject, or what Thomas Aquinas says about the existence of God with what Kant says about it. The contradictions are fundamental. That does not mean that they are insuperable. But it does mean that you cannot identify with any one of those texts without at one and the same time detaching yourself from another one. Such contradictions cannot be overcome by logic, but only by history and time.

Third, and most important, core texts draw a clear distinction between being a human being and being a member of society. All of them make that distinction, though in many different ways: explicitly, implicitly, by theoretical analysis, or by poetic representation, for example. I believe that it is precisely the clarity with which they make that distinction that earns them the epithet "great". Their

greatness does not rest on whatever particular body of rules or doctrines they may happen to set forth for whatever society in whatever fashion. It rests on the modesty with which they admit the likelihood that any particular system of rules will go the way of all temporal things. It rests on their conviction that the moral life requires not only rules that need to be obeyed but also the freedom to decide when those rules need to be changed -- a freedom that is impossible to identify with <u>any</u> particular system of rules because it is defined as the freedom from <u>all</u> particular systems of rules. It rests, in short, on the constancy with which they insist that human life is impossible to reduce to any particular system of rules.

Take Plato's <u>Republic</u>, for example. The whole book is about the irreducible tension between the individual and society, between truth and convention, philosophy and politics, nature and culture, what people happen to think and what is actually the case -- and it concludes that justice transcends all calculation, never mind that Plato tried, but failed, to prove himself wrong with his Sicilian experiment in statecraft. Take Aristotle. Aristotle, good professor that he was, made the distinction between good citizens and good human beings an explicit point of analysis, maintaining that the goodness of a citizen depends on a particular system of

rules while the goodness of a human being does not.[9] Take Homer. Who is Achilles, if not the hero who failed because he identified too closely with the rules of a particular game? Achilles was perfectly entitled to insist on his rights. He had, after all, suffered a real slight at the hands of Agamemnon. But he should have been able to stand above the game. There is only one moment when he does, namely, when Priam asks him for the body of Hector. Even Achilles recognizes that death puts an end to the game. But apart from that Achilles plays the game with a vengeance (note how accurately the idiom captures the problem). That is what caused his famous wrath. It is the wrath of the man who fails to recognize that he is wrong to insist on his rights. That is what the story of Achilles is about. Foreign wars, civil wars, and fights between siblings start like that. And that is why Achilles has to die. Odysseus, on the other hand, may live because standing above the rules is what he does best. Just think how he handles the Sirens! Hence he not only survives, but achieves victory in the end.

It is often said that core texts contain a heritage of great value. That is true, but it is misleading unless you add that the heritage is so valuable because it transcends agreement and disagreement. You cannot agree with it, and yet

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[9] Aristotle, Politics, 1276b-1277b. Admittedly that statement is too simple to capture the complexity of Aristotle's analysis, especially since it seems to me that Aristotle waffled.

you cannot dismiss it either. It is often said that the great books are great because they are the foundations of everything.[10] I would beg to differ. Great books are great because they throw serious doubt on the foundations of everything, including each other. I do not mean casual doubt. I mean real doubt, the kind of doubt that you cannot pass over, but that throws you into conflict with yourself and obliges you to make peace with yourself by taking stock of what you really believe. I do not know of a single great book that does not raise more questions than it answers, and that does not do as much to overturn basic convictions as it may do to confirm them. That is perhaps their single most important quality. It forces students to recognize that in fact they do believe in certain rules, even though these rules are neither self-evident nor immutable. Hence it sets them on the road to understanding that convictions we consider to be self-evidently true and right will one day, most likely sooner rather than later, appear to be just as profoundly shocking as some parts of, say, the Bible, Homer, or Plato already seem to us today.

Reading great books thus is no guarantee for stability. Quite the contrary, reading such books is a means of promoting change. Change is irresistible anyway. The question

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[10] I am quoting a statement by one of my students, who was exceptional only in the clarity with which he proffered one of the common justifications for reading great books, not in the naiveté of his belief.

how to escape from change is very much besides the point, if only for the simple reason that everyone of us will sooner or later pass away. The real question is about the pace and amplitude of change. Some people think that change can be slowed down and perhaps even reversed by insisting on the rules that are found in great books. I am convinced that such people are deluding themselves. Insisting on the rules, far from preventing change, only makes change more violent. And I can think of no better evidence to demonstrate the truth of that proposition than the very history of Western Civilization that is so often called upon to prove the opposite. Which civilization has placed more of its collective pedagogical energy on the mastery of classical texts? Which civilization has produced social change at a more rapid pace? And which civilization has amplified the scope and bitterness of conflict about the rules to a greater height? Why, then, would anybody think that a canon of great books could be a means of preventing change? I believe that there is no more powerful solvent of social stability than intellectual mastery of the very rules on which society appears to rest.[11] If you want to slow the pace of social change, my advice to you would be: stop teaching!

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[11] I am well aware that the example of China may be invoked as evidence that the study of classics can foster the long-term stability of a society. I am no expert on China, but I would venture the following points in response. First, the notion that China did not change over

There are many other matters I wish I could address. I would have liked to have spoken about the question whether there are not perhaps some rules that never change (I believe the categorical imperative is such a rule), about the circumstances that produce great books (rapid social change), about different types of change in the tradition (from oral to literate societies, from one textual tradition to another), about the character of people who write great books (a keen talent for rules, a keen suffering from change), about the canon ("canon" being nothing but the Greek word for "rule"), about the core curriculum at the University of Chicago, about specialization and the decline of liberal education, and about the fact that "amateur" is not a dirty

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time is surely a myth. Having studied similar myths in other areas of the world, I would be more than surprised if China did not change far more deeply, rapidly, and frequently than the myth allows. Here, too, the question is not about change per se, but about the pace and amplitude of change. Perhaps it could even be argued that the pace of change in China is really not at all slower than that of Europe. Second, assuming that there is a real difference in the pace of change between China and Europe, I wonder if Chinese classics were mastered in the same way in China as European classics were in Europe. Perhaps a case can be made that they were not. If I were to try and make it, I would look at the role of alphabetic writing, the grammatical structure of subject and predicate, the binary logic that is associated with such predication, and the social function of the learned classes that made the study of the classics their special endeavor as clues for the reasons why Europeans, over and over again in their history, broke with the very textual tradition on whose mastery they insisted, while the Chinese (apparently) did not. China and Europe may both have had canons of classic texts. But did they use them the same way? I doubt it.

word, especially not in liberal education -- but there is no time.

Let me therefore return to the few lines from Macaulay that I quoted at the beginning. Let me remind you what he said: "It is now time for us to pay a decent, a rational, a manly reverence to our ancestors, not by superstitiously adhering to what they, in other circumstances, did, but by doing what they, in our circumstances, would have done." I hope it is now clear to you why I thought those words were suitable to start this lecture. They encapsulate the central point that I have tried to make. And if Macaulay were alive today, I believe he would refrain from superstitiously repeating Macaulay of a hundred-sixty years ago. He would remove the little word "manly" from the phrase "a decent, a rational, a manly reverence to our ancestors." I doubt that a hundred-sixty years ago a lot of people even noticed the implication that only men, not women, are capable of such decent and rational reverence. And most of those who did may well have thought that it was unexceptionable. In our circumstances, however, people are likely both to notice the implication and to find it objectionable.[12] Hence Macaulay's words can no longer be repeated without change to the effect that he intended.

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[12] Unless, perchance, they find reverence to our ancestors objectionable in principle, on the grounds that such reverence is irrational and indecent by definition, regardless of whether it is paid by men, women, or children.

Let me amplify the point in closing by quoting a passage from Saint Augustine's Confessions that embodies the identical idea, even though it was written in a totally different context more than a thousand years earlier. Speaking of the relationship between social rules and true justice, and his own failure to understand that relationship before the time of his conversion, Augustine wrote:

> I knew nothing of the true underlying justice which judges, not according to convention, but according to the truly equitable law of Almighty God. This is the law by which each age and place forms rules of conduct best suited to itself, although the law itself is always and everywhere the same and does not differ from place to place or from age to age. I did not see that by the sanction of this law Abraham and Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and the others whom God praised were just men, although they have been reckoned sinners by men who are not qualified to judge, for they try them by human standards and assess all the rights and wrongs of the human race by the measure of their own customs.[13]

With these words Augustine defines the relationship between texts, society, and time with a clarity that has only rarely been echoed and never been surpassed. He identifies

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[13] Confessions, 3.7, quoted from the translation by R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961) p. 63.

the rules; he acknowledges that the rules contradict each other; he maintains that it is wrong to base one's judgment merely on such contradictions because conventional rules must be distinguished from true justice; he insists (and this deserves special notice) that even contradictory rules can flow from the same justice; he concludes that people who obey contradictory rules can be equally good human beings; and he warns against identifying with the rules so closely as to overlook the continuity that extends over time and the faith that unites Jews and Christians.

And yet that admirable clarity was not enough. The very same Saint Augustine who realized how wrong it is to judge some other human beings by the custom of your time and place is well known for having done just that when he provided perhaps the single most important justification for subjugating heretics by force.[14] And in the chapter immediately following the quotation I have just given you he condemns what he calls crimes against nature with an assurance leaving little doubt that at bottom he was no more able than any other human being to discern what he called "the true underlying justice" amidst mere conventions.

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[14] I am referring to his use of Luke 14:15-24, which became one of the cornerstones of the intellectual and moral edifice supporting the inquisition in medieval and early modern times. For details see, e. g., Edward Peters, Inquisition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) p. 28.

As far as I am concerned, that simply proves that none of us, enemies or friends, moderns or ancients, barbarians or Greeks, Jews or Christians, women or men, children or parents, now or in the future, here or elsewhere have any choice but to judge by our custom. But it proves as well that we have no right to judge by our custom unless we accept responsibility for doing so -- accept, that is to say, the obligation to reflect on our custom and be prepared to change it when justice says we must.[15] That, it seems to me, is the chief lesson to be learned from studying great books.

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[15] This is not the place to explain how such a thing could be possible, given everything I have argued. Let me just say that I think it is possible because the categorical imperative commands an absolute duty to do no particular thing.