



## Consumerism and the End of Liberal Education

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# ***Consumerism and the End of Liberal Education***

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Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman characterizes this era as a time of “liquid modernity.”<sup>1</sup> Rather than settled meanings, categories, and frames of reference, Bauman contends that meaning is always in flux, open-ended rather than closed. This flux is in large part driven and exacerbated by a culture of consumerism. “If our ancestors were shaped and trained by their societies as producers first and foremost,” notes Bauman, then “we are increasingly shaped and trained as consumers first, and all the rest after.” He elaborates on how consumerism masterfully manufactures and exploits the interior poverty of the human condition:

*Consumed goods should bring satisfaction immediately, requiring no learning of skills and no lengthy groundwork, but the satisfaction should end the moment the time needed for consumption is up, and that time ought to be reduced to bare minimum. The needed reduction is best achieved if the consumers cannot hold their attention nor focus their desire on any object for long; if they are impatient, impetuous, and restive; and above all if they are easily excitable and predisposed to quickly lose interest.<sup>2</sup>*

Bauman wrote these words in 1999, before the advent of the smartphone, which further confirms his diagnosis, as perhaps no single device has distracted and compromised our attention span more than “smart” screens. This phenomenology of the consumer is particularly troubling given the reputed aims of education. Whatever education is or ought to be (especially in a democracy), it should counter a culture that seeks to make us “impatient, impetuous, and restive.” This is certainly not the good life, and the limited resources of our planet, as well as the ever-widening gulf between the rich and poor, further necessitates fighting against the seductions of needless consumption.

The battle against consumerism, or reining it in, I take as part of our normative charge as educators. Liberal education aims to be a positive force against excessive consumption, seeking to fashion autonomous selves who are able to resist the pressures of popular culture. In light of this pervasive challenge, I explore in this essay how liberal education (the ways of thinking and the practices that it aims to instantiate) cultivates and buttresses an autonomous self who can withstand the distorting forces of unsustainable consumption.

I begin with an overview of liberal education, noting two dominant understandings or traditions that comprise it. The first tradition emphasizes critical thinking skills as the basis for securing autonomy. The American Association of Colleges and Universities (AACU) is a strong proponent of this approach. The second tradition underscores the importance of cognitive or quasi-spiritual exercises as essential for battling the passions that can undermine autonomy. Pierre Hadot’s work especially has drawn attention to this tradition, which views liberal learning as a way of living more than a way of thinking. With this

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<sup>1</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor* (New York: Open University Press, 2005), 37.

schematic overview in hand, I then to turn to David Foster Wallace’s essay “This is Water.” Wallace, a fiction author first and foremost, paints a compelling picture of how each approach plays out in the trenches of ordinary life. What emerges is the importance of both traditions for ensuring the telos of liberal education: the autonomous self.

### ***Liberal Education as Critical Thinking***

In his study *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education*, Bruce Kimball distinguishes two traditions of liberal education: the tradition of philosophers and the tradition of orators. Philosophers prioritize critical thinking and the pursuit of knowledge as the core of liberal learning.<sup>3</sup> Orators, in tension with philosophers, view liberal education as fundamentally about appropriating established virtues and the cultivation of practical wisdom. Liberal education for orators is a way of living more than a than a way of thinking.

According to Kimball there has been and continues to be ignorance about these two traditions, which in turn accounts for the present-day confusion surrounding the nature and meaning of liberal education. That said, the philosophical tradition, incarnated in the contemporary research university’s pursuit of new knowledge, reigns today. The philosophical tradition has proven remarkably nimble. With an eye on an ever-changing workplace, the philosophical tradition of liberal education, with a fair bit of success, justifies itself as equipping students with transferable critical thinking skills, requisite for attaining personal autonomy.

James Freedman aptly sums up the aspirations of this approach: “a liberal education ought to make a person independent of mind, skeptical of authority and received views, prepared to forge an identity for himself or herself, and capable of becoming an individual not bent upon copying other persons.”<sup>4</sup> The AACU, perhaps the most public and vocal defender of liberal education, extends this line of thinking, arguing that the critical thinking skills that liberal learning imparts offer the best preparation for civic engagement and work in an ever-changing world.

Max Weber, in his classic essay “Science as a Vocation,” advances this vision of liberal education.<sup>5</sup> Written during the first World War, Weber’s target audience consisted of students “looking to their professors to become political leaders and ‘prophets’ in post-war Germany.”<sup>6</sup> Aiming to dislodge this expectation in students, Weber is also taking aim at the *Bildung* tradition in Germany in which character and soul formation were an integral part of the educational process. In light of disenchantment, secularization, and the fact-value distinction, Weber argues that education, especially at the post-secondary level, should dispense with character formation and focus on two primary goals: knowledge transmission and the building of new knowledge (*Wissenschaft*).

Teachers, as Weber notes, should not be about promoting worldviews or guiding students in the conduct of life.<sup>7</sup> “The genuine teacher,” Weber says, “speaking from the lectern, will take care not to

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Kimball, *Philosophers and Orators: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 37.

<sup>4</sup> James O. Freedman, *Liberal Education and the Public Interest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 56.

<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans., H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 129–56.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9–10.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Stanley Fish, in “Save the World on Your own Time,” quotes a 1967

force any point of view on [her students], whether explicitly or by suggestion, while claiming to ‘let facts speak for themselves.’<sup>8</sup> Weber’s concern is the power of a teacher’s platform. When weighing in about worldviews or life conduct, “it is just too easy for [the teacher] to demonstrate the courage of [her] convictions where those present, who may be of a different opinion, are condemned to silence.”<sup>9</sup> Students who expect moral direction from their teachers are “looking to the professor to be something other than what he can be for them. They are looking for a *leader* and not a *teacher*.”<sup>10</sup> This is beyond the scope of faculty expertise. Doing so compromises autonomy. “Professors . . . are trained to transmit knowledge and skills within their chosen discipline, not to help students become more mature, morally perceptive human beings.”<sup>11</sup>

The teacher may clarify the implications of competing worldviews or different modes of conduct, placing before the student “the necessity of making [a] choice. He cannot do more, as long as he remains a teacher.”<sup>12</sup> Weber anticipates Kohlberg’s values clarification approach. Through critical reflection, students are guided to gain theoretical distance from their choices and see the impact of respective values or the competing gods of our time, as Weber referred to them. “Figuratively speaking, you serve this god and offend that other one if you decide in favor of this particular view, since, if you remain true to yourself, you inevitably draw this or that conclusion regarding an ultimate inward meaning.”<sup>13</sup> While a teacher may clarify the implications of particular ethical choices, she should remain neutral about her opinion regarding matters of ethical import, and she should certainly not aim to cultivate habits or virtues required to enact and sustain an ethical view.

Faculty, Weber states in blunt fashion, are “true to their own calling when they steadfastly refuse to address questions about meaning of the whole or the purpose of human life.”<sup>14</sup> There is no place, as Weber somewhat mockingly notes, for a professor to take on the role of a “petty prophet.”<sup>15</sup> Doing so compromises the autonomy ideal, which is at the heart of true liberal education.<sup>16</sup> The AACU finesses this point, but aligns with Weber’s vision, upholding the telos of the enlightened, autonomous self, who is highly skilled and malleable, capable of adapting and responding to an ever-changing world.

Given the goal of autonomy, the context of teaching needs to be “carefully monitored so as to be free from dogmatism and authoritarianism.”<sup>17</sup> “What is to be avoided,” Elmer Theissen explains, “is an education that results in unthinking conformity to popular opinion, blind acceptance of authority,

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University of Chicago report that states the university exists “only for the limited...purposes of teaching and research,” reasoning that “since the university is a community only for those limited and distinctive purposes, it is a community which cannot take collective action on the issues of the day without endangering the conditions for its existence and effectiveness.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 23, 2003, <http://www.chronicle.com/article/Save-the-World-on-Your-Own/45335>.

<sup>8</sup> Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” 141.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–40.

<sup>11</sup> Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Weber, “Academics as a Vocation,” 142.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Richard Stanley Peters, *The Concept of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1973), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Elmer John Thiessen, *Teaching for Commitment: Liberal Education, Indoctrination, and Christian Nurture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 47.

dogmatism, and a closed mind.” Given that, “close attention must be paid to methods of education, avoiding authoritarian instruction, stimulation of rational thought, and encouraging critical reflection.”<sup>18</sup>

The autonomy ideal, as it is sometimes described, is, as it were, on the right side of history, holding up maximal autonomy as the telos of education. This is seemingly the most fitting education for a free and diverse democratic society. “Different moral and lifestyle choices are to be respected, provided they are freely made and do not come at the expense of other people’s safety or freedom to choose.”<sup>19</sup> Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy’s opinion in the 1992 abortion case *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* articulates the vision that undergirds the autonomy ideal: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”<sup>20</sup> Schools, accordingly, are charged with maximizing individual autonomy and freedom. “We each define for ourselves our own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”<sup>21</sup> Given the plurality of values schools can teach about such questions, they must be careful to avoid supporting or favoring normative positions about meaning and purpose. Wary of striking the right balance, higher education largely steers clear of such matters altogether.

What is noticeably absent from the philosophical approach to liberal education is engagement with the passions. It does not directly address how education should contend with the many passions and desires that can pull us in so many different directions, undermining the very autonomy it seeks to secure. This is striking given that liberal education historically was centered on educating and properly forming our desires and passions. The philosophical tradition, however, adheres to the position that education, if it is authentic and resists becoming a form of indoctrination, should aim only to engage and activate the intellect. Trying to appeal to or guide the passions compromises real education. This approach is hopeful that information, knowledge, and critical thinking will equip students to make good decisions vis-à-vis their passions and desires.

### ***Liberal Education as a Way of Life***

In tension with the autonomy ideal right from the start was the formative ideal of liberal education, or oratorical ideal as Kimball describes it, that seeks to engage the intellect but also prompts formation of character. It too aims for the promotion of freedom, but sees intellectual development as only part of the story. To be capable of true autonomy, we need more than the liberation of the individual from coercion and the development of critical thinking. “We need,” as James Smith argues, “a certain sort of moral formation.”<sup>22</sup>

In contrast to our modern “ethic of pluralism,” which reinforces “a soft relativism and non-judgmentalism,”<sup>23</sup> formative liberal education aimed to impart a normative vision of human flourishing and provide a pathway towards living into this vision. More than a way of thinking, it constituted a way of living. More than thinking beings, the formative or oratorical ideal regards human beings as primarily

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> As quoted in Yuval Levin, “Taking the Long Way,” *First Things*, October 2014, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/10/taking-the-long-way>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Levin, “Taking the Long Way”.

desiring, passionate beings, who are often living “in a state of unhappy disquiet.”<sup>24</sup> Consumed by worries, “torn by passions” and misguided desires we are often not our true or best selves.<sup>25</sup> Where the philosophical tradition views human beings as fundamentally rational (at least potentially so), the oratorical tradition views human beings as fundamentally disordered, living in a state of suffering and unconsciousness, principally caused by the passions, especially “unregulated desires and exaggerated fears.” This formative tradition of liberal education takes as given that humans are often “prevented from truly living . . . because they are dominated by worries.”<sup>26</sup>

Given the human state of disorder, the oratorical tradition historically included spiritual exercises as essential for genuine liberal education that upholds freedom as its telos. Hadot invokes the term “spiritual” “to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism. Above all, the word ‘spiritual’ reveals the true dimensions of these exercises.”<sup>27</sup> Something more than thinking or argumentation is at stake: “the point is not to set forth a doctrine [or discursive mandate: treat people as ends], but rather to guide the interlocutor towards a determinate mental attitude.”<sup>28</sup> In undergoing these exercises, Hadot explains, we aim to “let ourselves be changed, in our point of view, attitudes, and convictions. This means we must dialogue with ourselves, and hence we must do battle with ourselves.”<sup>29</sup> The spiritual exercises provide a pathway and a practice for returning “to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desires. The ‘self’ liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our moral person, open to universality and objectivity.”<sup>30</sup>

Reflecting on Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, Hadot further illuminates the practices of this tradition.<sup>31</sup> Aurelius’s *Meditations*, situated within the Stoic wisdom tradition, is an enduring text but has received, as Hadot notes, mixed reviews from critics over the centuries. Many find it to be a derivative, unsystematic, and unoriginal work of philosophy. In this criticism Hadot observes a categorical mistake. In his *Meditations* (which Hadot says are better translated as Exhortations to Himself), Aurelius seeks to enact rather than discourse about philosophy—to live rather than theorize about a wisdom tradition. Instead of an original treatise (the modern standard for what counts as rigor), Aurelius’s exhortations demonstrate existential rigor as he strives to live into the very ideals he espouses. Through the *Meditations* we “get to see someone in the process of training to become a human being.”<sup>32</sup>

Much of the *Meditations* consists of key proverbs repeated throughout the text. Written as daily notes and briefly expanded upon, they serve as aids or prompts for Aurelius’s daily examination of conscience. They constitute a “discourse that intends to form more than inform.”<sup>33</sup> They facilitate critical self-examination, helping Aurelius combat with himself, and prompting Aurelius to maintain a thoughtful conversation with himself.

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<sup>24</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 265.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Hadot, *Way of Life*, 201.

<sup>33</sup> Hadot, *Inner Citadel*, 20.

This ability to converse with oneself is a central part of the oratorical tradition of liberal education. It involves careful self-examination wherein one becomes keenly aware of the voices within, and thereby choosing which voice should prevail. Similar to physical exercises, which give athletes “new form and strength to their bodies,” spiritual exercises provide practitioners with strength of soul, modifying their “inner climate,” transforming their “vision of the world” and, finally, their “entire being.”<sup>34</sup> The telos of the way of life tradition is a liberated self, who overcomes one’s egotistical, passionate tendencies.

### ***Liberal Learning in the Trenches***

It is on this internal conversation that David Foster Wallace casts a sharp spotlight, situating it within the humdrum of ordinary life, contending that this internal battle (or choosing what one thinks about) is the true value of a liberal arts education. Wallace’s comments are directed to students, specifically to an audience of graduating seniors at Kenyon College, a premier liberal arts college. Concerned that the merits of liberal learning might fall on deaf ears and sound hyperbolic or abstract Wallace makes his case for liberal learning “concrete.”<sup>35</sup> Somewhat bluntly he tells the graduating seniors that “you do not yet have any clue what ‘day in, day out’ really means.”<sup>36</sup> In other words while they may have a theory of liberal learning, they lack experience applying the practices of liberal learning to the mundane life that awaits them. There are, he goes on to relate, “whole large parts of adult American life that nobody talks about in commencement speeches. One such part involves boredom, routine, and petty frustration.”<sup>37</sup> It is to this part that Wallace directs his attention, inviting his audience to enter vicariously into how liberal learning works (or fails to work) on the ground.

Wallace paints a picture of the typical and trying experience of having to slog your tired, hungry body through traffic, after a long day of work, on the way to get groceries for dinner. The irritable, yet all too familiar, details of this ordeal are exposed—a shopping cart that tilts askew as it rolls, others shoppers who seem intent on getting in your way, the dreary muzak that plays in the background, the absurd number of choices for spaghetti sauces, the insufficient number of cashiers to handle the volume of customers, the miserable traffic on the way home, and so on and so on. It is at this point, Wallace underscores, that the *real work or practice* of liberal education begins. He explains:

*The point is that petty, frustrating crap like this is exactly where the work of choosing comes in. [This is a true autonomy test]. Because the traffic jams and crowded aisles and long checkout lines give me time to think, and if I don't make a conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to, I'm going to be pissed and miserable every time I have to food-shop, because my natural default-setting is the certainty that situations like this are really all about me, about my hungriness and my fatigue and my desire to just get home, and it's going to seem, for all the world, like everybody else is just in my way, and who are all these people in my way?*<sup>38</sup>

To the extent that we give in to our default setting—becoming a slave to our misery—we have forgotten our liberal education and forsaken its sustaining practices. While we may have written a brilliant thesis on Plato’s *Symposium* or Hannah Arendt’s *The Banality of Evil*, to the degree that we are laid low by a typical day of shopping after a long day of work—falling prey to our egotistical, lizard brain—to that degree we have failed to enact or to embody liberal learning.

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<sup>34</sup> Hadot, *Way of Life*, 201.

<sup>35</sup> David Foster Wallace, “This is Water” (commencement address, Kenyon College, Gambier, OH, May 21, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

In Wallace's narrative both approaches or traditions work in concert to sustain the autonomous self. The first approach provides the critical thinking skills that enable an individual to assess the macro and micro consequences of consumer choices and act responsibly, as well as to understand the pressures of the machine on the working class. The second approach, "the conscious decision about how to think and what to pay attention to" (aka Hadot's spiritual exercises), fortifies the individual against the passions and desires that can cause even the most liberally educated person to regress into egotism. Autonomy in the trenches requires both traditions to resist a larger culture that encourages egotistical thinking. The "world of men and money and power," Wallace notes, "hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self."<sup>39</sup> "Our own present culture," he goes on, "has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom . . . the freedom to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation."<sup>40</sup>

Yet, given the larger culture, is the ideal of the well-informed stoic achievable for most of us? Can we sustain this way of life given our penchant for distraction and our egotistical default setting, and the cultural forces that seek to exploit this? Recall the *time to think* that Wallace refers to in traffic or grocery lines. This time has become increasingly pervaded by digital media. The smartphone revolution of the past decade, notes Andrew Sullivan, has inhabited those few "remaining redoubts of quiet—the tiny cracks of inactivity in our lives . . . being methodically filled with more stimulus and noise."<sup>41</sup>

Are the dominant practices of liberal education (critical thinking and constant self-examination) enough to withstand the ever encroaching powers of consumerism? The philosophical approach, while it provides resources for seeing the world more objectively— one can hopefully better understand the challenges of a working-class cashier thanks to the critical thinking skills honed by a liberal arts education—does not prepare one to contend with the passions and frustrations that plague so much of ordinary life. The oratorical approach, while it does address the passions, offering cognitive exercises to direct how and what one thinks about, requires living at a level of cognitive intensity that I fear is not sustainable for ordinary mortals.

While Wallace illustrates the triumph of liberal learning, he also illuminates how tenuous it is, and ten years since his commencement address, it appears even more precarious given the smartphone revolution. While liberal education continues to employ the tools of logic and critical thinking (and perhaps self-examination) to engage the cognitive faculties of students, *Nike* and *Apple*, by contrast, capture the affective register of young people with a litany of images, sounds, and experiences, producing a veritable liturgy that generates and directs human desires. I am left wondering whether the practices of liberal education (offered by its two dominant traditions) can withstand the forces that shape us into being mindless consumers, lest we, like Marcus Aurelius, maintain a level stoic severity that is beyond human.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew Sullivan, "I Used to Be a Human Being," *New York Magazine*, September 2016, <http://nymag.com/selectall/2016/09/andrew-sullivan-my-distraction-sickness-andyours.html>.



### **Liberal Learning and Embodied Community**

Wallace does, however, suggest an alternative to the students. The freedom “to be lords of our own tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation” he says has much to recommend it. “But of course,” he says somewhat as a matter of fact,

*there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying. The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day. That is real freedom. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default-setting, the “rat race”— the constant gnawing sense of having had and lost some infinite thing.<sup>42</sup>*

Without saying much more Wallace moves from an understanding of liberal learning as primarily about the self’s achieving autonomy (which requires heroic overcoming) to an understanding of liberal learning as primarily about heteronomy, or the freedom to love others within the context of a community. Autonomy it turns out, according to Wallace, is a minimum. The goal is not so much freedom, but the freedom to do what you ought to do. This real freedom is the ability “to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.”

To better understand this vision, one must turn to Wallace’s magnum opus, *Infinite Jest*, where he develops more fully what this third way of liberal learning consists of, especially through his protagonist Geoffrey Day. A child of the Academy, Day embodies its signature ways of thinking and being, yet he is also a drug addict. The tools of a liberal arts education have not equipped him to deal with this moral failing. Unwillingly, yet with no other recourse, Day turns to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). His assessment of this program is dismissive. What he finds particularly jarring are the platitudes that permeate the AA program. With resignation he reflects:

*So then at 46 years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés . . . To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés. One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go. Keep coming back.<sup>43</sup>*

These clichés are embedded within practices and habits that constitute a new way of living. Yet Day is repelled by these banal truisms and the tedium of the practices. Given his sophistication, he holds in suspicion “the idea that something so simple and, really, so aesthetically uninteresting . . . can actually be nourishing in a way that arch, meta, ironic . . . stuff can’t.”<sup>44</sup> “Day wants to be liberated from the addiction by knowledge.”<sup>45</sup> Dismissively he says,

*As if, I mean, what’s supposedly going to be communicated at these future meetings I’m exhorted to trudge to that cannot simply be communicated now, at this meeting, instead of the glazed recitation of exhortations to attend these vague future revelatory meetings? Just tell me what I need to know, he*

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<sup>42</sup> Wallace, “This is Water.”

<sup>43</sup> David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York: Bay Back Books, 2006), 270.

<sup>44</sup> Laura Miller, “David Foster Wallace,” *Salon*, March 9, 1996, [http://www.salon.com/1996/03/09/wallace\\_5/](http://www.salon.com/1996/03/09/wallace_5/).

<sup>45</sup> Jamie Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 25.

*basically says. Let's drop the monotony of meetings and the daily regimen; just give me the information, the knowledge I need.*<sup>46</sup>

Reflecting on *Infinite Jest* in an interview, Wallace explains that AA is particularly challenging for liberally educated people like Day who struggle “with the fact that the AA system is teaching them fairly deep things through these seemingly simplistic clichés.”<sup>47</sup> Day’s liberal education has predisposed him against the simplistic in favor of the complex and the original. The Academy has immunized him from an ability to appreciate, recognize, and really understand what is happening in AA. Day’s liberal education for autonomy impedes his ability to accept and submit to the practices and habituation of a loving community.

But where does this leave critical thinking? If embracing such a community requires uncritical submission, is critical thinking (the sine qua non of genuine liberal education) thereby undermined? Wallace’s narrative suggests otherwise. Don Gately, another key protagonist, shares Day’s tendency to intellectualize and balk at the platitudes of AA. Yet in spite of his intellectual proclivities, Gately is able to commit to the program. He stays the course. He works the work, embracing the clichés of AA without fully understanding or appreciating them. Eventually his critical assessment of AA begins to transform. He comes to understand the practical wisdom and insight of the program mediated through submission to a community and its embodied practices. Reflecting on the process, he observes:

*And the palsied newcomers who totter in desperate and miserable enough to Hang In and keep coming and start feebly to catch beneath the unlikely insipid surface of the thing, Don Gately’s found, then get united by a second common experience. The shocking discovery that the thing actually does seem to work. Does keep you Substance-free. It’s improbable and shocking . . . The idea that AA might actually work unnerved him.*<sup>48</sup>

Gately’s way of thinking is changed by his way of living.

*He is not able, at this point, to fully explain how just sitting on hemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work. Nobody’s ever been able to figure AA out, is another binding commonality. And the folks with serious time in AA are infuriating about questions starting with How. You ask the scary old guys How AA Works and they smile their chilly smiles and say Just Fine. It just works, is all; end of story. The newcomers who abandon common sense and resolve to Hang In and keep coming and then find their cages all of a sudden open, mysteriously.*<sup>49</sup>

Where, though, does Gately stand with respect to the dangers of communitarian approaches that risk the charge of indoctrination, undermining the ability to think for oneself, subscribing to blind conforming and a loss of authenticity? Like Day, Gately begins the AA process with a stubborn will, resisting conformity. Yet, at some point, he decides to conform to the protocols, to accept the practices, its guiding clichés or proverbs, and to suspend critical thinking for the time being. Trusting the wisdom of the AA elders, he embraces the program. He recounts his experience as follows:

*And so you Hang In and stay sober and straight . . . and when people with AA time strongly advise you to keep coming you nod robotically and keep coming, and you sweep floors and scrub out ashtrays and fill stained steel urns with hideous coffee, and you keep getting ritually down on your knees every morning*

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<sup>46</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 1001.

<sup>47</sup> Miller, “David Foster Wallace.”

<sup>48</sup> Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 349.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

*and night asking for help from a sky that still seems a burnished shield against all who would ask aid of it — how can you pray to a “God” you believe only morons believe in, still?—but the old guys say it doesn’t yet matter what you believe or don’t believe, Just Do It they say.*<sup>50</sup>

Gately’s conformity, while initially lacking full comprehension, eventually becomes clear-sighted and intentional. He comes to realize that something “as banal and reductive as “One Day at a Time” enable[s] these people [and himself] to walk through hell.”<sup>51</sup> He discovers that “in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have life-or-death importance.”<sup>52</sup> What initially seemed so “lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses” great truth.<sup>53</sup> What appeared to Gately at first to be tried clichés he now realizes are in fact wisdom proverbs.

Given Gately’s progression, the apparent conflict between uncritical submission and critical thinking takes on a different perspective. While there is suspension of critical thinking, this enables Gately to have an experience that eventually expands his critical thinking. Whether this submission is necessarily illiberal depends upon the kind of tradition one is initiated into.<sup>54</sup> The AA tradition, which values honesty, openness, and criticality, particularly towards oneself, empowers its adherents with certain tools (most notably clichés and personal testimonies) to embark on a process of thoroughgoing self-examination. The practices of AA serve a liberal end. Gately’s critical thinking, rather than diminished, becomes sharper, as it is informed by an experiential wisdom he could not surmise from the outside.

Uncritical submission, however, may be morally defensible and compatible with critical thinking, as long as it leads to greater openness and expanded critical thinking, which is true for Gately. The trajectory of the tradition makes all the difference. Does the tradition encourage questioning and provide tools for self-critique, which Alasdair MacIntyre describes as a living tradition, or does it stifle questions and discourage critical examination?<sup>55</sup> AA exemplifies a living tradition.

This third approach to liberal education is the best alternative for addressing consumerism. It incorporates not just the critical thinking and struggle with the passions, but also encompasses the habituation, practices, and community necessary for sustaining human freedom. This more robust version of liberal education is particularly necessary in light of the social media blitz that holds us, but especially our students (I-generation), in its thrall.<sup>56</sup> Human freedom is arguably more beleaguered than ever by the addictiveness of virtual media, and the forces that shape us to be mindless consumers.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Miller, “David Foster Wallace.”

<sup>52</sup> Wallace, “This is Water.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Bryan Warnick, “Ritual, Imitation and Education in R. S. Peters,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 43, no. s1 (2010): 57–74.

<sup>55</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984).

<sup>56</sup> See especially, Jean Twinge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/hasthe-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>.