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Session I

Everything is Terrible!

Readings:

- William Deresiewicz, “The Disadvantages of Elite Education” (June 2008).
- Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education* (2018), Introduction, chapter 1.

Guiding Questions:

- What are schools for?
- What objections do Deresiewicz and Caplan make to contemporary American education? What are their assumptions, stated or unstated, about what education *should be*?
- What is Caplan’s “signaling theory”?
- What is the relationship between these objections and democracy?
- What are the most important problems and insufficiencies in our schools?

Session II

What *was* Liberal Education?

Reading:

- Plato, *Apology*.

Guiding Questions:

- What, according to Socrates, is education? What should it aim at? How should it be approached?
- What is “the virtue of a human being and citizen” (*Apology*, 20a)? Is the best human being the same person as the best citizen?
- Can education occur if one has neither a sense of reverence/awe nor a sense of shame? Why might these – especially shame – be so crucial for education?
- Is it true that the unexamined life is not worth living for a human being?

Session III

Our Democratic Spirit

Reading:

- Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1835), selection.

Guiding Questions:

- According to Tocqueville, in what ways does democracy (which he understands as a social state characterized by relative equality of conditions as much as a political regime of equal rights) influence how Americans think and where they get their ideas? How does it motivate them, and how does it constrain their thoughts?
- What are the defects of democracy, and what kind of education is needed to overcome them?
- Must education be geared towards the regime? Does a liberal education run counter to the regime? What if the regime is a liberal democracy?
- If we determined that character/morality ought to be an important goal in a democracy, what type of character/moral traits and qualities would be inculcated?
- Is virtue teachable? What about the soul and the passions? Can you educate the spirit? In a free, liberal democracy like ours, what would it look like to attempt to educate the spirit in our schools?

Session IV

Democracy and Education

Reading:

- Booker T. Washington, *Democracy and Education* (1896).
- W.E.B. Dubois, *The Talented Tenth* (1903), selections.
- Erica Goldson, *Here I Stand* (2010).

Guiding Questions:

- Why does Booker T. Washington think that education ought to be aimed at cultivating industrious and useful citizens? Why does W.E.B. DuBois disagree with Washington? If Washington could offer a rebuttal to DuBois, how might he respond?
- Should education in America be aimed at liberating the self, or at forming noble and good citizens? In other words, should education be tilted towards personal or political aims? How might our education change depending on how these questions are answered?
- In our American democracy, what would it mean to be useful and beneficial to society? Is this not a noble aim?
- Is liberal education for everyone? Which man here has the more democratic ideals?

Session V

Conclusion

Guiding Questions:

- Can education flourish if schools are the only institutions for learning? If no, what are the other institutions that are necessary to complement and complete our educations?
- Are liberal education and American democracy in tension with one another? If yes, what is the nature of that tension? What should be done?
- What ought to be our goals, going forward? Are any ideas by Plato, Tocqueville, Washington, or DuBois particularly relevant for our present situation?
- Is a liberal education supposed to be useful? If not, what is its purpose?