

Three Aesthetic Ideals: The Philosopher, the Prophet, and the Pluralist

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Let me begin by briefly restating Jon Fennell's four major points: First, the aesthetic ideal inspires and animates moral action, hence the significance of aesthetic education, as Socrates well notes in the *Republic*. Second, two of the most compelling aesthetic ideals are the life of reason and the life of faith, or as Matthew Arnold described them, the Hellenic ideal and the Hebraic ideal.¹ Though both ideals are committed to ultimate truth, they are fundamentally at odds; while the Hellenic person cherishes right thinking, the Hebraic person prizes right living. Moreover, adherents of each of these ideals vie and contend for political power, which issues in what Leo Strauss refers to as the "theologico-political problem." Third, public education, as is, educates for neither ideal. Rather, since public schools are committed to both tolerance and the virtue of openness, they embrace the dictum that all truth is relative. Consequently, the passionate longing for truth that founds the quest for either right thinking or right living is undermined. Finally, while the conflict between faith and reason, or between the prophet and the philosopher, is unavoidable, it can, with aesthetic sensitivity and judgment, be confronted with candor and care so as "to reduce occasions for conflict or at least to make the outcome of such conflict, when it arises, predictable and agreeable." I think that Fennell, in this last point, is also suggesting that aesthetic education can help ease the tension that exists between the Hellenic and Hebraic ideals, and thus ameliorate the "theologico-political problem."

I will address the relative merits of each point. Point one, on aesthetics, I concur with wholeheartedly. Peirce's reminder about the importance of aesthetics prompts renewed reflection on which aesthetic ideals, both implicit and explicit, inspire youth to action, whether moral or immoral. The pressing educational question is whether modern public schools, given our pluralistic context, have the capacity and wherewithal to faithfully impart the Hebraic or Hellenic ideals. More fundamentally: Why should schools even be charged with this task? As Arnold keenly notes, both ideals arise out of profound and perennial needs in the human condition — the one intellectual, and the other moral. They are extraordinary contributions to the human spirit. To be ignorant of one or both is to miss out on the "best of what has been thought and said." Moreover, it is to be blind to the recurring "theologico-political problem" that Strauss illuminates.

This leads into Fennell's second point. While I think Fennell would agree with Arnold's general assessment, Fennell's characterization of the contrast between the life of philosophical reason and the life of revealed religion lacks Arnold's subtlety. In explicating the contrasts between the Hellenic and Hebraic ideals, Fennell creates a dichotomy that appears altogether too tidy, and overlooks the complex overlap between and within both ideals.

The Hebraic ideal, in its commitment to the Law, is not as univocal as Fennell suggests. Rather, within religious traditions, there is often not a blind submission to the Law, but rather an ongoing interpretation or *midrash* that continually seeks to interpret and apply the Law in different contexts. Faith traditions often invoke critical reasoning as they make distinctions and apply principles to unique contexts. Furthermore, much of the Law, as incarnated in the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, and the Beatitudes, arguably aligns with the best of what reason has surmised. While God's command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is the paradigmatic case of faith and reason in conflict, a case which Søren Kierkegaard places front and center, Thomas Aquinas makes just as compelling a case for faith and reason working in concert together, with the supernatural virtues building on natural virtues.

Moreover, while the life of faith often employs the resources of reason, reason too, to quote Deborah Kerdeman, is "pulled up short."² When we decide upon an ethical course of action or way of life that appears reasonable, we act in part on faith, hopeful yet uncertain that our reasons for acting will endure the test of scrutiny over time. What appears reasonable at one point may, upon further review, be questionable. Our reasons are always provisional.

And this ceaseless questioning can paralyze the philosopher, which, I submit, creates a problem for the Hellenic ideal. While the Hebraic person may argue over the Law, she holds up action in accordance with the Law as urgent and pressing. Endless speculation is kept in check by a guiding *telos*, the core of which is beyond question. In contrast, the philosopher is prone to endless questioning that can result in inaction, as all *teloi* are held in abeyance, subject to further review. At its best, the Hellenic ideal issues in an erotic and ceaseless quest for knowledge that resists skepticism. Yet, while the Hellenic ideal offers sweetness and light, and the promise of seeing things as they truly are, the ideal often, as Arnold notes, lacks moral strength, which in turn fosters moral laxity. Here is where the philosopher can learn from the prophet. The prophet accepts a *telos* as worth dying for, and acts accordingly; meanwhile, the philosopher calls into questions all *teloi* worth dying for, save the ability to question.

What is required is a precarious balance of both the Hellenic and Hebraic ideals. Rather than understanding these ideals as dichotomous, as Fennell does, they are, I submit, better understood as a complex dialectic: To neglect faith is to lose moral vigor, while to neglect reason is to risk fanaticism. Depending upon the circumstances, each ideal may "show itself to us [as] more august, more invaluable, [and necessarily] more preponderant over the other, according to the moment in which we take them, and the relation in which we stand to them."³ There is no clear script; there is no final (and therefore static) balancing of the two. Rather, *phronetic* judgment that continually negotiates both ideals is required, and it must be sensitive to the moral and intellectual needs that ground them.

In light of this dialectical awareness, what might an aesthetic education look like? Here is where Fennell's argument begs for illumination. Public education, Fennell notes, attends to neither ideal, but rather cultivates a lukewarm pluralism,

while the “theologico-political” problem persists. Thus, what Fennell calls for, “given the nature of aesthetic development, is to adopt practices that systematically shape the young so as to reduce occasions for conflict, or at least to make the outcome of such conflict, when it arises, predictable and agreeable.” What Fennell’s aesthetically sensitive education would look like, and its purpose, remain unclear. Fennell seems to be arguing for an aesthetic education that promotes both ideals, so that the inherent conflict between them is ameliorated. Thus Fennell’s aesthetic education serves a larger political purpose, namely to ensure that encounters between philosophers and prophets are “predictable and agreeable,” but subsuming their ideals within a larger political purpose risks sapping their power and integrity.

Nevertheless, I am somewhat perplexed as to whether, and how, public education can faithfully impart the Hebraic ideal in a way that is sensitive to the demands of pluralism. Neither I nor Fennell take this on. However, I share Fennell’s and Allan Bloom’s concern about a commitment to pluralism that shirks passionate commitment altogether, and I fear that the Hellenic ideal, or reason left to itself, all too easily colludes with a passionless pluralism, thus losing its erotic edge that craves truth. The Hellenic intellect requires the moral ballast of Hebraism to stoke its *eros*, but our Enlightenment hands are tied, as we revere the separation of church and state. Thus “the best of what has been thought and said” remains hidden, lest we offend others with our convictions. Yet pluralism, I am hopeful, need not be without passion; it need not surrender greatness and distinction, or the erotic desire for moral and intellectual truth. Rather, informed by our intellectual and moral hungers, we can feast at the pluralistic banquet, noting with care, discernment, and good judgment what provides nourishment, and what is lacking. Rather than starting with a clash of absolutes — Law against philosophy, Law against Law, and philosophy against philosophy — an aesthetic education ought to awaken us to our profound human needs, both moral and intellectual, lest we remain ignorant of them and attempt to satisfy them on cheap fare.

1. Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism,” in *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On Arnold’s distinction between Hellenism and Hebraism, see pp. 126–152.

2. Deborah Kerdeman, “Pulled Up Short: Challenges for Education,” *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004).

3. Matthew Arnold, “Culture and Anarchy,” 133.

I am especially grateful to Dini Metro-Roland and Heather Gary for their helpful suggestions and edits.