

“National Standards” vs the Free Standards of Culture:  
Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* and  
Contemporary Educational Philistinism

Bruce Novak  
*University of Chicago*

Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, at the outset of the wonderful, and very full, recent collection of essays, *Philosophers on Education*, apologizes for the omission of several important thinkers. Included on her short list of six is Matthew Arnold. The reason for this omission was probably the lack, in the late nineties when the volume was compiled, of a single scholar “qualified, willing, and sympathetic” enough to write about Arnold.<sup>1</sup> This essay’s purpose is to explain and to *start* to fill this gap.

Arnold is one of the slipperiest but, I hope you will eventually come to see, one of the most important figures in the history of educational thought — even, I would say, in the history of thought in general. Beloved today, in the field of education, mostly by arch-conservatives for his recommendation that education focus on “the best that has been known and said in the world” — which, it is assumed, means an exclusive focus on the eternal truths of the Western canon — he saw himself as a confirmed liberal. He mocked the conservatives of his own time, as he might very well those of ours, as “moral desperadoes.” One of his greatest fans was none other than Jane Addams. Arnold’s most important educational works took the form of pamphlets and public addresses, so he has not been given the kind of attention that is given to system makers and treatise writers. Yet he had an intimate and thorough acquaintance with all the great Western thinkers, ancient and modern — especially with Plato, Aristotle, and Kant. Though he never says as much, the notion of “criticism” central to all of his work comes from Kant’s Third — and in some ways most important — Critique, the *Critique of Judgment*, which addresses our capacity to think anew. His attitudes toward life and ways of speech are as direct embodiments of the ideas in Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Rhetoric* about virtue and the means of sharing and spreading it as can anywhere be found. And in his method of engaging critically with life’s most important issues by engaging in spirited dialogue with his immediate contemporaries, he is — self-consciously, I think — a modern Socrates.

Arnold’s multifarious career has over the years been thoroughly treated in most of its aspects, except what for him was its central one. Much has been written about him as a late-Romantic poet, as a literary critic (perhaps the first truly modern one in English), even as a social and political theorist. But as a thinker about democratic education — his main concern for most of his life — he has been for many years almost entirely neglected. The conservatives who like him, such as William Bennett and Diane Ravitch, refer to him often without reading him closely. (They would be disabused of their liking if they did.) And liberals who *should* like him tend not to read him at all because he is so well liked by their enemies. Arnold’s main claim — on us as well as his contemporaries — is that the institution of universalized *liberal* education is essential for the establishment of healthy democracy. He shares with

Hannah Arendt the understanding that only a certain kind of conservative education (that is, an education that works to *interpret* traditions rather than to inculcate them) can provide the proper leaven for freedom: only an education that respects and preserves the variety of human thought can authentically bring into the space of human appearances what is new and revolutionary in each individual human being.<sup>2</sup> And he shares with Michael Oakeshott the understanding that the tradition of liberal education that got its start with Socrates, whether or not it is institutionalized in democratic political life, constitutes *in itself* a kind of democracy of the spirit, being “above all else, . . . an initiation into the art of . . . conversational relationship” necessary for the individual human person to make his or her “debut into [the drama or adventure of] human life.”<sup>3</sup> Arnold envisioned the time when such an initiation would be provided for every human being, the time when liberal education and political democracy were intentionally united, as no less than the fulfillment of the potential of human life: the state in which every human being would have the capacity to engage in the kind of Socratic engagement with one another that would make that life truly worth living, and truly free. He deserves *a lot* of our attention, particularly in these times in which astoundingly shallow ideas of human freedom are held out as mindless bulwarks against evil.

What I will do here is to try to demonstrate briefly for you the potential power — both philosophical and political — of the Arnoidean approach to education. I am going to pit Arnold against one of his strongest defenders — Ravitch, who, in her work *Left Back*, has recently placed the whole tradition of progressive education, from Dewey onward, under severe attack.<sup>4</sup> But implicit in these remarks is the larger idea that reconceiving the old tradition of liberal education for modern, egalitarian democracy (as Arnold did first and did most philosophically comprehensively, employing the best tools of modern as well as ancient thought) is the best way to resolve the culture wars that are now consuming democratic educational life at all levels. The liberal education of the individual human person represents, I think, the golden mean between the progressive and conservative forces now engaged in those wars: a happy medium that we can justify as the best way to make people both individually and collectively free. Our culture wars are, in a way, a battle between the ideological programs of a socially constructed future and a socially reconstructed past. Our ability to work out a peace process to end those wars may rest in the extent to which we learn to enfranchise the individuals we teach to cull for themselves a better future from the varied bounty of the collective human past — in Arnold’s famous phrase, “the best that has been known and said in the world” — that we select to pass down to them.

#### OUTWARD AND INWARD PROGRESS

The conservative grip on democratic education right now is stronger even than on most other fields of democratic life. Few outside of the educational community questioned the Bush *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, and it received a vote of ninety to ten in the Senate — perhaps the most conclusive vote of any initiative that has been put forward by our President in these divisive times. This does not bode well for our long-term future, whatever the immediate future may bring us. Right on the cover of Ravitch’s book we can find a picture of the democratic future conservative

forces envision: a straight row of uniformed children, Black and White, boys and girls, outwardly diverse, but in the process of acquiring standardized souls, each, pencil firmly in hand, staring seriously down at the same exercise on the same worksheet. The “national standards” movement in democratic education seems poised to create a great nation of pencil pushers; or, put in the rather grander terms of *A Nation at Risk*, the famous 1983 report, an unprecedentedly industrious nation with “unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation.”<sup>5</sup> Is there anything missing from this picture? “Unchallenged preeminence,” in one view of things, would seem to be a rather high goal, but might there be an even higher one — or at least a more appropriate one for a democracy?

*Culture and Anarchy* — today Arnold’s best known work (in fact, his only prose work currently in print in an affordable edition) — was titled, when he first conceived it, “Progress through Puritanism and Progress through Culture.”<sup>6</sup> Arnold, who made most of his living as an inspector of schools, saw over and again pictures resembling pretty exactly the cover of Ravitch’s book. What he saw, though, even in children at their most dedicatedly industrious, was not the tranquility and equanimity that Ravitch wants *us* to see, but rather “the rigid mould in which . . . Puritanism . . . cast their spirit.”<sup>7</sup> Half a century before Max Weber, he saw the “iron cage,” the cultural and historical origins of modern industrial culture and the outward riches it sought to cover its inward poverty. Unlike Weber, though, he believed that there was a key that could unlock that cage, that could free the human spirit from what he elsewhere called “the prison of Puritanism.”<sup>8</sup> That key he called “culture.” What Arnold meant by this word has little to do either with the currently fashionable relativistic concept of it conveyed in much anthropology *or* with the basically fundamentalistic concept of it adopted by many of his present day followers, who idolize the canonized artifacts of high culture. Arnold defined culture, using the German notion of *Bildung*, as “inward perfection.” And in *Culture and Anarchy* he broadly laid out the educational standards of inward perfection that could be used to confront and subsume the Puritanical standards of outward performance that, used alone, serve only to constrict the souls of those who are educated by them. Those standards, the standards of culture, are *relational* ones: we perfect ourselves, and others, by engaging and continually re-engaging with the human world in which we find ourselves. Through this process, we never attain absolute truth or world dominance, but we do learn gradually, in the words of what is now Arnold’s most famous poem, “Dover Beach,” “to *be* true to one another,” and to ourselves (emphasis added).

“DILIGENCE AND EXCELLENCE” OR “SWEETNESS AND LIGHT”? THE STANDARDS OF  
OUTWARD PERFORMANCE VS THE STANDARDS OF INWARD PERFECTION

Ravitch, in *Left Back*, has a very different standard of truth, not only unrelational but unfree. Throwing aside the very “democratic-liberal” tradition of education of which she once, a quarter of a century earlier, saw herself as being a courageous proponent,<sup>9</sup> she looks to a kind of cultural fundamentalism as the only possible remedy for the “nostrums and enthusiasms” of progressivism: “What American education needs most, she says, is more attention to fundamental, time-tested truths.”<sup>10</sup>

What *has* been “time-tested” in education? Here is the picture she paints of American schools before the bewildering “progressive” era that began around the beginning of the last century:

The common schools emphasized reading, writing, speaking, spelling, penmanship, grammar, arithmetic, patriotism, a clear moral code, and strict discipline, enforced when necessary by corporal punishment. The values they sought to instill were honesty, industry, patriotism, responsibility, respect for adults, and courtesy. The schools were vital community institutions, reflecting the mores of parents and churches; events at the local school, such as spelling bees, musical exhibitions, and speaking contests, were often important community events.<sup>11</sup>

A lovely communitarian vision, to be sure, but where is freedom found here? Ravitch cites, but passes over in silence, the comments of “the muckraker Dr. Joseph Mayer Rice” upon visiting a school in New York City in 1892: “the most dehumanizing institution that I have ever laid eyes upon, each child being treated as if he possessed a memory and the faculty of speech, but no individuality, no sensibilities, no soul.”<sup>12</sup>

“A Nation at Risk,” likewise, vaunts its devotion to democracy, offering that “A high level of education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.” But the report is focused, above all, on making the Nation (this word is worshipfully capitalized throughout) *one*, through standardizing “training” in “skills,” not on making it *free*. Is it an accident that a report that from the outset focuses on the “unchallenged preeminence” of the Nation “in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation” seems to pay only lip service to the word “freedom”? Not a single high school English teacher or a single university professor from the humanities was included on the National Commission on Excellence in Education that prepared the report, though authorities in economics, physics, and chemistry were. And, perhaps for this reason, no one on the National Commission on Excellence in Education, seemingly, was sufficiently philosophically astute to be able to question the adequacy of the very criterion upon which the report, and their very existence as a commission, was based — the criterion of “excellence” — as the fundamental test of the worthiness of a system of *democratic* education:

We define “excellence” to mean several related things. At the level of the *individual learner*, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a *school or college* that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, then tries in every way possible to help students reach them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Our Nation’s people and its schools and colleges must be committed to achieving excellence in all these senses.<sup>13</sup>

“Excellence,” in these terms, has nothing to do with the establishment of “pluralism and individual freedom” within “a common culture”;<sup>14</sup> it is *only* about “performing” to “high expectations.” It is not that such expectations should be abandoned, but that in limiting the *whole* of education to the inculcation of strictly measured standards of outward performance, the search for pluralism and freedom is forsaken, sacrificed to the “unifying national preoccupation” of common training toward the display of behaviors given out by the authorities.<sup>15</sup> Anarchy is certainly avoided, and national unity and competitiveness gained, but at what cost? Why can we not have unity and,

at the same time, a *program*, to which we give the highest priority, for attaining "pluralism and freedom"?"

We are fortunate, already on the second page of *Culture and Anarchy*, to find the advice that Arnold would have offered to the members of the National Committee on Excellence in Education:

I have freely said, that in my opinion the speech most proper, at present, for a man of culture to make to a body of his fellow-countrymen who get him into a committee-room, is Socrates':  
*Know thyself!*<sup>16</sup>

Arnold came to write this work — a compilation of six essays the first of which was originally called "Culture and Its Enemies" — in response to two Liberal politicians who, attacking his earlier ideas, had spoken, far more freely than our present day committee members, of (in Arnold's words) "how poor a thing this culture is, how little good it can do in the world, and how absurd it is to set much store by it."<sup>17</sup> For Arnold, culture was not alien to politics, but the key to its true success. In contrast to the qualities of "common sense," "resolution," and "enthusiasm" assumed by pretty much everyone — in our own time just as much as in his — to be central to democratic power politics, Arnold thought the qualities of "experience," "reflection," and "renouncement" would lend *true* power to democratic life. He saw a system of education based *only* on "common sense" "performance standards," inward "resolutions" of "diligence," and outward "enthusiastic" competition for "excellence" to be fit only for a narrow-minded, unpluralistic and unfree "Progress through Puritanism." A democratic system of education based on "Progress through Culture," on the other hand, might serve as the midwife for a new birth of freedom.

What is culture, what good can it do, and what is our special need of it? Arnold begins the first chapter of *Culture and Anarchy*, "Sweetness and Light," first by saying what culture is *not*, what people like his antagonist Frederic Harrison (and probably also Ravitch and the Committee on Excellence in Education) assume it to be. Culture is not, or not simply "curiosity." It is not *limited* to humanistic or scientific *inquiry*, to investigation of what *is*, pure and simple. "Curiosity" and the inquiry that arises from it, *does* describe a necessary *part* of culture, but it is a misconception, even by many who conceive themselves to be fundamentally men and women of culture (like Harrison, of Oxford and Ravitch, of New York University) that that part is sufficient to constitute the whole of it:

there is of culture another view, in which not solely the scientific passion, the sheer desire to see things as they are, natural and proper in an intelligent being, appears as the ground of it. There is a view in which all the love of our neighbour, the impulses toward action, help, and beneficence, the desire for removing human error, clearing human confusion, and diminishing human misery, the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it, — motives eminently such as are called social, — come in as part of the grounds of culture, and the main and pre-eminent part. Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in curiosity, but as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a *study of perfection*. It moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good.<sup>18</sup>

In its insistence on harmonious development, on the inwardness of wisdom and beauty, and on the integrated processes of individual, social, and general human growth, the infinite ideal of free culture eclipses all the partial, false, totalizing, and

outward ideals that can *ever* be set by a fixed system of educational standards measuring only outward performances. The “perfection” of culture eclipses the “excellence” of supervised performances.

What is “our own special need” of culture? Perhaps in no other single passage does Arnold’s voice leap so directly and immediately across ocean and the century and a third that separates his place and time from our own:

Faith in machinery is, I said, our besetting danger; often in machinery most absurdly disproportioned to the end which this machinery, if it is to do any good at all, is to serve; but always in machinery, as if it had a value in and for itself. What is freedom but machinery?...Our coal, thousands of people were saying, is the real basis of our national greatness; if our coal runs short, there is an end of the greatness of England. But what *is* greatness? — culture makes us ask. Greatness is a spiritual condition worthy to excite love, interest, admiration; and the outward proof of possessing greatness is that we excite love, interest, and admiration. If England were swallowed up by the sea tomorrow, which of the two, a hundred years hence, would most excite the love, interest, and admiration of mankind — would most, therefore, show the evidences of having possessed greatness — the England of the past twenty years, or the England of Elizabeth, of a time of splendid spiritual effort? Well, then, what an unsound habit of mind it must be which makes us talk of things like coal or iron as constituting the greatness of England, and *how salutary a friend is culture*, bent on seeing things as they are, and thus dissipating delusions of this kind and *fixing standards of perfection that are real!*<sup>19</sup>

For Arnold, if there is any single thing from which our Nation is most “at risk,” it is from its unchallenged, single-minded *desire* for “unchallenged preeminence” in the *machinery* of (in the words of the opening of “A Nation at Risk”) “commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation.” It is most fundamentally “at risk” in its inability to see the difference between human greatness, the excellence of inward spirit, and the ability to clobber the competition through a combination of material and mental muscle that enables us to excel only in terms of arbitrary, unreal and delusory outward shows. Though our Nation might gain the fear, envy, and amazement of the whole world — through its utmost dedication to the acquisition of unparalleled wealth, power, and “objective” knowledge — what will it *really* have gained, what will it have gained *in human terms*, by pretending to be fully satisfied with such stuff?

How do we right our “standards of excellence” in mere outward performances to attain “standards of perfection that are real”? These are the questions that Arnold answers, in various ways, throughout *Culture and Anarchy*. What he finds in its pages are four different ways in which we have confined ourselves in our own machinery, and four essential freedoms that we can gain through culture. The first is the freedom to attune oneself to the world, which he designates as “harmonious perfection” or “sweetness.” This is the standard of “experience” which he opposes to “common sense.” Acknowledging the primal reality of one’s personal experience and opening oneself to the beauty contained therein constitutes the first step of freedom. We free ourselves from the perceptions of “the they” of “common sense” to feel what is peculiarly our own. The second freedom, that of “inward perfection” or “reflection,” involves the integration of one’s experiences, the formation and reformation of the consciousness of a self, the continuing questioning of one’s identity in the face of new experience. This is opposed to the machinery of

unthinking “resolution” which acts upon the world rather than upon the self whenever it detects disharmony. The third freedom is that of “general perfection,” or “renouncement.” This is the freedom to transform oneself and one’s fellows through the process of understanding and relating to different others across social and historical boundaries. It is the freedom one finds in engaging in genuine dialogue, which Arnold opposes to “enthusiasm,” the monologic idolization of our own ideas in pretended conversations. Renouncing something of ourselves and our cultural prejudices and taking something of others into our hearts, through the careful cultivation of good will in many varieties of situations, is the summit of human freedom and human growth. Engrossing ourselves in differing forms of human life, we expand our souls in renouncing something of our individual wills. And as more and more of us learn to do this, we collectively create the phenomenon of “social spirit” — a general feeling of equanimity and *creative* community.

LETTING LIFE BE GOVERNED BY HOPE:

SPONTANEITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE BELIEF IN THE HUMAN SPIRIT

The last freedom is different from the others. Arnold’s sense of it emerged only gradually in the course of writing *Culture and Anarchy*, and there is a way in which he did not get a full sense of it until he came to write his last great essay, titled, simply “Emerson.” This is a freedom which is part human, part divine: the sense that in being open to and part of the power of “spontaneity of consciousness” we participate in an existence that is not *just* larger than ourselves, but transcends us. In Emerson’s words, “Shall not the heart, which has received so much, trust the Power by which it lives?”<sup>20</sup> Emerson’s great motto, of course, was “Trust thyself.” Superficially, this seems a dangerous mantra in the modern world, and some have interpreted it, as Arnold notes, as an arrogant trust in their own present perfection. But this is a clear misreading, a reading done from the perspective of the present rather than that of the human future and the human spirit. To Arnold, and, I think, to anyone who understands it in the full sense in which it was meant, this motto means, “Trust the spontaneity of consciousness that connects us with the force of our own life, with the lives of others, and with the general life of the cosmos, the life of the spirit of which we form, even the very best of us, only a tiny part.” Arnold ends this essay with a prophecy, both for America and for the world:

I hear it said that Emerson was too sanguine; that the actual generation in America is not turning out so well as he expected. Very likely he was too sanguine as to the near future; in this country it is difficult not to be too sanguine. Very possibly the present generation may prove unworthy of his high hopes; even several generations succeeding this may prove unworthy of them. But by his conviction that in the life of the spirit is happiness, and by this hope that this life of the spirit will come more and more to be sanely understood, and to prevail, and to work for happiness, — by his conviction and hope Emerson was great, and he will surely prove in the end to have been right in them.<sup>21</sup>

It is, of course, through these four freedoms — the freedoms of experience, of reflection, of renouncement, and of hope; of harmonious perfection, of inward perfection, of general perfection, and of perfection itself — that the unsuspected potential political power of culture becomes manifest. Through them both Harrison’s open contention of Frederic that “the man of culture cannot be entrusted with power” and the implicit opinion of the Committee on Excellence in Education that culture

is peripheral to the pursuit of power when we are faced with dangerous competitors are refuted. Culture *is real, true, human* power. In evoking lasting and genuine “love, interest, and admiration,” it ties us to one another — far more thoroughly than any fascistic Nation, unified simply through its strict adherence to given standards, *possibly* can — in our consciousness of the ever-growing, self-perfecting power of the human spirit.

In these dark days — dark both for democratic education and for democracy itself, which seems to have literally gained the world and lost its soul — it may seem sometimes that this self-perfecting power has ceased to do its work. We can I think, still take heart in Emerson’s and Arnold’s words: Though the actual generation in America is not turning out so well, by *our* conviction that we can inwardly perfect ourselves and one another, and by our hope that such acts will some day come to be broadly seen as the *true* pursuit of happiness, the human spirit may yet prevail. We must not forget that the jury — and it is a jury in the most literal sense — is still out.

---

1. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, “Acknowledgements,” *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (New York: Routledge, 1998), xiv.

2. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 193.

3. Michael Oakshott, “A Place of Learning,” *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakshott on Education*, ed. Timothy Fuller (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 24.

4. Diane Ravitch, *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform* (New York: Touchstone, 2000).

5. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Educational Reform* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1983), 5.

6. Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold: Vol. 5*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), 201.

7. Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold: Vol. 2*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962), 317-18.

8. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy and Other Writings*, ed. Stefan Collini (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), xviii.

9. Diane Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique on the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

10. Ravitch, *Left Back*, 453.

11. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

12. *Ibid.*, 21.

13. National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation At Risk*, 12-13.

14. *Ibid.*, 7.

15. *Ibid.*, 12.

16. Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold: Vol. 5*, 88.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 91.

19. *Ibid.*, 95.

20. Matthew Arnold, *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold: Vol. 10*, ed. R.H. Super (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 181-82.

21. *Ibid.*, 184-85.