



The Great Books in the Twenty-first Century

by Eliot Grasso

Up through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the *Respublica Literaria*, or “Republic of Letters,” was the ongoing, long-distance dialogue among intellectuals who were part of the “Great Conversation,” an extensive, centuries-long inquiry into reality; an investigation into how things really were, and, consequently, how they should be.

Participants in this conceptual Republic were typically well read in classic and contemporary works so that they would be able to contribute something of value to the conversation, and they frequently wrote in Latin, a second language common to many. So then, unlike most “conversations” that are localized by language, nationality, geography, custom, and culture, the Republic of Letters transcended the barriers that typically constrain discourse. Those engaged in the Great Conversation had a sense that despite differences of belief and opinion, they were working on a project common to humanity.

They studied what today we call “the humanities,” examining aspects of humanity such as virtue, morality, judgment, cultural myth, and social narrative in order to give human behavior healthy guidelines. Over time, however, and with increased emphasis on the sciences (math replaced Latin as the *lingua franca*), the “soft disciplines” of the humanities came to be thought of as nothing more than discrete cultural artifacts that make only localized cultural claims rather

than absolute universal claims. So, while the concept of the Republic of Letters still exists today in the sciences (the belief that quantitative analysis gives human beings access to ultimate reality is the driving force behind this remnant of the Republic of Letters), the part of the Republic of Letters that focused on examining the truths of humanity went underground.

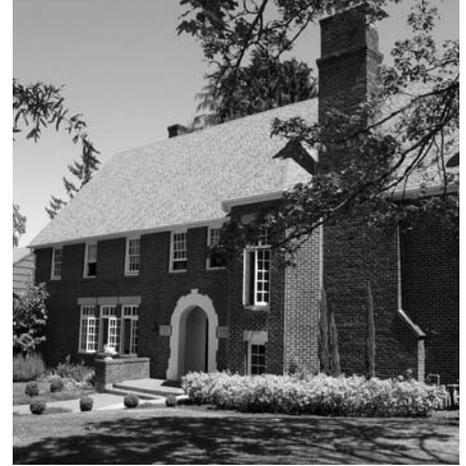
Though quiet in the educational chambers of our culture, however, voices still call for a reexamination of shared humanity. On the 750th anniversary of the birth of Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321), Pope Francis commented on the significance of Dante’s poetry:

He invites us, once again, to discover anew the meaning that is hidden or lost in our human path and to hope to see once again the luminous horizon from which our dignity as human persons shines forth in fullness.¹

To Pope Francis, Dante’s work helps humanity recover meaning and dignity, aspects that have been growing ever dimmer since the Republic of Letters handed the torch to the sciences.

Gutenberg College, too, calls its students to be active participants in the Great Conversation through reading Dante’s and dozens of other authors’ “Great Books”—those classics

¹Webb, Heather. *Dante’s Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman*. First edition. ed. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1.



written in a time and culture different than our own but which address universal human issues and questions. These Great Books offer insight and lessons about human heritage, diversity, and conflict that are immediately relevant to the twenty-first century.

Human Heritage

We take our human heritage for granted. Consider what a book is, for example. A book is an incredible human achievement of communication and invention.

When we think of books, we think of communication first because books confront us with words, with a particular language—say English—that has been transformed and developed by human speakers for centuries. A language will have been used to commend children, correct peers, codify laws, and accomplish a host of other functions. In the hands of fluent speakers like William Shakespeare, the English language has grown and changed. Shakespeare alone added over 1,700 words that are still in common use, including “amazement,” “elbow,” “madcap,” “puking,” and “zany.” Books capture this language.

Written language and the ability to read it are incredible achievements. An English word like “cat” not only gives me a field of meaning by which I can start to guess at what an author might mean, but the combination of letters, c-a-t, gives me anatomical information about how to move my mouth, lips, tongue, jaw, throat, and diaphragm. To read a book and understand the meaning of its



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words, I must have a working knowledge of how to shape my mouth to make the letter sounds and have either some experience of the words used in context by an English-speaker and/or the ability to interpret the words in their given context. Orally-transmitted information reduced to groupings of letters on a page helps me come to know the mind of another human being if I am able to interpret the pictures of sounds (for that is what written words are: pictures of sounds) which fill the book.

But books are more than communication. They are more than language. They are also objects of human invention that require the skills of many people to bring into being. The process, method, and tools used to make books are the result of an extensive human heritage. People must cut trees, transport them to a mill, and turn them into paper. Engineers must design the tools and vehicles used for that process as well as the machinery of the mill that cuts the tree. Other people must teach the engineers how to make the machinery. From the mill, the paper must be sent to a publishing house. Typesetters must align all the letters in the right order to convey the author's exact words so that his meaning is not obscured and the entire project defeated. A single error can turn 'lead' into 'leaf' and 'plea' into 'pea'. Then the books must be distributed—a process as complex and detailed as the processes used to make the books.

To hold a book, then, is to interact with a deep and rich human heritage. When I read a book, I am interacting not only with centuries of innovation in spoken and written human communication but also with the work of hundreds of people, from the author to the delivery-truck driver. A book exhibits an extraordinary depth of know-how and skill that transcends many generations.

We tend to take this for granted. Our technological society prioritizes what is new. Consequently, we can forget about the foundational effort and heritage on which the new thing is built. And, by extension, we fail to realize that without the inheritance, nothing new *could* be built.

There is tremendous continuity in human heritage because human nature does not change. By this, I mean that the essence of humanity—what we want, our motivations, our emotions, our rationality—exhibits great consistency. The times and places in history when human heritage was severely disrupted—the Greek Dark Ages, for example—are catastrophic. They represent an irretrievable loss of human culture and activity. These disruptions make the history books because they are so serious.

I say all this about the human heritage upon which something like a book is built as a meditation on Pope Francis's commentary on Dante. Dante, immortalized for his classic work the *Divine Comedy*, explores in his trilogy many issues that are as relevant today as they were in the middle ages. Dante investigates deeply what it means to seek vengeance, to experience remorse, and to hope for absolution. These characteristics are not particular to late-medieval Italy; they are global, transcending time, geography, language, and culture. The issues that Dante brings to light in the *Divine Comedy* re-center the reader on an experience shared by billions of people: being human.

Shakespeare captures our shared humanity in a famous speech by the Jewish moneylender Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, scene I. In response to Salerio, Shylock, calling on the anatomy, sensations, passions, and emotions that he believes are common to both Jews and Christians, says this:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?

The incredible human heritage evident in the object of a book speaks to the common human heritage evident in speeches such as Shylock's, in which mankind as a beautifully

diversified unit can recognize that despite cultural differences, we have a shared and indelible humanity.

We need to be reminded of this shared heritage in the twenty-first century, and reading the Great Books can help remind us. In a world where technology allows us to hide behind impersonal communication, allows us to order everything we could ever want without having to leave our homes, and allows us to absorb endless entertainment in solitude, acknowledging this common heritage can bring us back to our senses. It can make us feel whole. It reminds us that we belong to the human family.

Diversity

The Great Books put us in touch with real diversity. Our world has seen a great deal of violence against minority groups. This violence is reprehensible and unconscionable, not least of all because it minimizes the humanity of individuals within those groups. In response, our culture has called for increased toleration and enhanced attention to "diversity." Within the shared heritage of the human family, there is great and beautiful diversification. Yet, were we to stop and define diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, I believe that we would miss the opportunity to identify diversity in its most meaningful form.

To fully recognize human diversity requires an investigation into someone's mind and individual personhood. Proverbs 23:7 gives us insight into where an individual's personhood is located: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." The author implies here that the internal thoughts, postures, assumptions, commitments, and beliefs play a significant role in the identity of a person.

All the members of the human family are complex. And because of these complexities, it can take quite a bit of time for us to understand how another person thinks. Not only does another person "thinketh" a variety of things "in his heart," but he may not be able to articulate all those things in a way that we immediately understand. It stands to reason, then, that to truly engage with the diversity of the human family, we must become practiced in learning how others think because only then can we say that we "know" who they are.

Reading the Great Books gives us practice engaging with human diversity on its deepest level: the level of how others think. When I read *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes or *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, I am engaging with something fundamental to these two human beings: their thoughts, beliefs, and commitments. Page after page of carefully wrought text reveal these aspects as authors like these try to help me, the reader, understand something that they believe to be important. Authors write because they hold an intellectual commitment to a set of ideas, and their way of articulating those ideas is specific, personal, and distinctive. While Thomas Hobbes probably thought about food, dress, and the weather similarly to other Englishmen of the seventeenth century, no one thought exactly like him on every point.

Two authors can live during the same time, in the same part of the world, in the same culture, be the same gender, have the same skin color, dress similarly, consume similar diets, and suffer from similar ailments, yet their ideas and personhoods remain distinctive. A culture is not as homogenous as one might like to think but rather is diversified by the personalities and minds that create it. Although these contextual elements affect individuals at a deep level, man receives his unique personhood from God.

The Great Books help us recognize that true diversity is found in the subtle nuances of individuals' language and thought. To focus on these nuances helps us to practice the arts of patience, charity, and judgment. And we need to be skilled in these arts if we are to live and serve well.

Our world is in turmoil, in part, because we dehumanize each other in the process of gaining greater and greater efficiency. It takes time and effort to try to understand another person, to treat him as fully human, to treat him as we would like to be treated. If we recognize, however, that all human beings share a common heritage—a heritage that the Great Books make evident—perhaps treating other people as a neighbor instead of an opponent will seem more possible. When we recognize that all people participate in the same human family and that this family shares many core elements in the midst of great diversity, perhaps we can begin to contemplate how to solve conflicts in a humane fashion.

Conflict

The Great Books teach us how to make conflict humane and respectful: they can teach us how to listen and respond well if we're willing to practice.

Listening is a rare skill in the twenty-first century. Televised debates provide a good example. These debates are not always enacted to discover the truth of an issue or to acknowledge what might be valid in an opponent's argument. In worse-case scenarios, they can deteriorate into expedited, personal, ad hominem diatribes that fail to thoroughly address the heart of an important issue.

The Great Books, on the other hand, center debates on ideas rather than on people. For example, Thomas Reid will engage with David Hume on the level of Hume's ideas. Reid will work quite hard to ensure that every sentence he writes addresses the issue that Hume is raising. Reid does not waste words critiquing Hume's character, his personal history, his race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or other aspects of his person beyond the idea he offers. Reid thus demonstrates the kind of thoroughness and nuance that we would be well-served to observe in our twenty-first-century debates.

Thoroughness and nuance take time to process. As Seneca once said, "Time reveals truth." If we are too anxious to *do* something, to achieve some outcome, we may forgo a deep, time-intensive search for truth in order to obtain the manufactured peace that goes with the fleeting satisfaction of a half-baked conclusion.

We may also forgo listening, which also takes time and energy but is crucial to understanding. Perhaps we don't listen because we have concluded that the person with whom we're conversing is wrong. Or perhaps we feel

that we simply do not have time to listen. But listening is well worth the practice because it's not only essential for seeking truth, but it also signals to another person that he is worth understanding, even if we don't agree. Listening well affirms another person's humanity and, by proxy, our own.

Reading the Great Books helps us practice the art of listening well. Often, an author presents a complex idea in a wide arc that takes an entire book to examine. Such writings help us practice patience, and they can help us practice suspending final judgment until we have read another person's entire argument.

Spinoza famously wrote in his *Ethics* that "Minds...are not conquered by arms, but by love and nobility." The twenty-first century has inherited centuries of conflict, and those conflicts do not seem to be subsiding. We need the Great Books to teach and remind us what love and nobility are. If it is true that as a man thinketh in his heart, so is he, then we will need to understand love and nobility in order to speak to the mind of our neighbor.

The Great Books help us to search patiently, charitably, and carefully for knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. To use the words of Pope Francis, reading the Great Books helps us recover our humanity by acknowledging our shared human heritage, by recognizing the diversity of personhood within that heritage, and by helping us practice affirming each other's personhood through careful listening and human dialogue.

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