

What Powerful Ideas Should We Teach?

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Given the characterization of powerful ideas in my last paper—powerful ideas are meta-ideas, structures that contain, arrange, and transmit other ideas as components—the answer is clear: we should teach absolutely every powerful idea that exists and challenge students to invent new, powerful ideas.

I would like to digress to discuss the suggestion that powerful ideas have a specific content, which naturally seems to lead to the conclusion that we must censor some powerful ideas since the ideas might be pernicious. In the writing on the topic of the nature of powerful ideas, people commonly pointed to fascism as a powerful idea but one that must be controlled. Fascism poses terrible critical problems if you understand powerful ideas to be ground ideas. I like to read science fiction, and I think that one of the most challenging works of science fiction is Robert Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*. Heinlein is an interesting figure. As an American officer in the second world war and after witnessing the near defeat of the west by the numerically inferior fascist nations, Heinlein became convinced that democracy was doomed and became a fascist, himself, and in *Starship Troopers*, Heinlein presents a scientific morality that serves as the basis for his fascism. Heinlein astutely observes that we already restrict the franchise to those intellectually qualified to exercise it by virtue of age and without any disqualifying history of criminal behavior and asks why we cannot more broadly restrict access to the franchise. Heinlein's arguments are very compelling because I think that many people agree with his claims about human nature, and taking such claims for granted, one cannot hope to refute the idea that fascism is superior to democracy.

How can one defend democracy against the likes of Heinlein or Plato as he outlines his political program in *Republic*? The answer is not to be found in accepting the terms of the arguments of Heinlein or Plato—indeed, they are very methodical, rigorous thinkers, and refuting their arguments in specifics is a fool's errand—but they are vulnerable to more general criticisms over their styles of argument. They both make extensive claims about human nature, and putting these claims at the heart of a construction should offend any keen observer. For an argument to be careful, it must be frugal, and neither Heinlein nor Plato are sparing in their assumptions about human nature. Especially since individual choices and lives are at stake, academic conscientiousness demands careful interrogation of foundations. Political science isn't physics where freely

assuming everything necessary to support your conclusions just makes you look ridiculous; when we make assumptions about people, we run the risk of wrecking lives, crushing hopes, and breaking minds and bodies. In short, the meta-idea that the best model of the world is the frugal model of the world recommends democracy over fascism because democracy carries the lower potential for error.

The concept of the frugal model carries a negligible bias, as do all of the structures and sensibilities that I have described as powerful ideas, so teaching them indiscriminately is not only safe but essential to the complete development of a keen, critical sense. I was in college before anyone made any effort to teach me a sense of appreciation for meta-ideas, and the university had an excellent approach to developing a sense of appreciation for meta-ideas. The university introduced the students to Marx by insisting that the students read Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* as a document of social philosophy before continuing to read Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript of 1844* in the same way. Since most students were acquainted with readings of Marx and Smith as writers in the domain of political economy, a domain appropriate for Smith but alien for Marx, by contrast the university was able to teach that the way in which people read a text determines their understanding and evaluation of the text and to give an appropriate introduction to the work of Marx. The contrast of two styles of reading was important to teaching the meta-idea on the significance of styles of reading, and I believe that meta-ideas can often be taught by the device of forced contrast. By effectively teaching any meta-ideas at all, we can train a new generation of critical students, and I believe that students that successfully learn a single meta-idea become more likely to recognize other important meta-ideas on their own.