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EDUCATION AT ODDS

It is an honor, and it is also very daunting, to stand before you today to speak about the aims of education here at the University of Chicago. Having in preparation for this talk taken the time to read previous addresses by my colleagues, I can tell you that everyone before me has felt equally honored and most have felt likewise daunted or intimidated, which means that up to this point I've told you nothing new. Also like me, many of my predecessors have desired not only your attention but also a cash advance on your sympathy so that if you happen to get bored or bothered by what we have to say you'll be more likely to say in turn, "Well it was a very difficult thing to do, so we shouldn't be too hard on the poor speaker."

Nonetheless you may be wondering about the "daunting" and "intimidating" part of this—that is, aside from the size of the audience gathered here, why shouldn't I find this a bit easy? After all, everyone who has delivered this address has been someone who has spent her or his entire adult life involved in higher education in one way or another, so it would seem reasonable to expect an "Aims" speaker to be quite comfortable in this role if it's just an exercise in describing what it is we do. But that's not quite right, is it? Describing what you're doing is not quite the same as describing what you are aiming at by doing it, particularly if by getting involved in higher education you might also be subjecting yourself to aims other than your own. So even if I were to redefine my task as something more manageable, say, speaking to you on the Aims of Teaching Literature, or the Aims of Teaching American Literature, or even the Aims of Teaching African American Literature, I would still fall short of the mark demanded here.

To elaborate a bit, one way of describing what I do is to say that I try to make students like you feel that, for the time being, the most important task facing you in this world is, say, trying to figure out how to interpret the final paragraph of Henry James's novel, *The American*. I would stress the importance of this task, not because it would help you get a better grade in my course (which, of course it would), not because it would somehow make you a better person (which it might, although I wouldn't bet on it), and not because it would give you skills that you could apply to other tasks (although assuredly if you can read Henry James you do have some skills that will stand you in good stead elsewhere). No, my aim would be to have you devote yourself

to producing the best understanding or best interpretation of that novel that you could—no more, no less.

But is that, I hope you are asking, aiming high enough? If that's all I'm up to then, on this view, higher education might be best represented not as an assembly or a synod in which august professors deliberate on the most effective way to organize a curriculum for higher purposes, but rather as something closer to a summer art fair in which each professor stands within a booth displaying and extolling his/her wares, not caring particularly what's being displayed in the surrounding booths so long as a steady stream of customers flows his or her way.

It would be, then, only when the stream slowed to a trickle or threatened to dry up altogether that you might be forced to take a look around to see what was going on and discover that, say, huge crowds had gathered over at the booth marked "Economics" while only a stray customer managed to find her way into the booth marked "Classics." And if you happened to find yourself in the sparsely populated regions of this educational bazaar, you could respond in one of several ways: You could decide that this is indeed a marketplace of ideas and that those undertakings that fail to find paying customers, so to speak, should rightly give way to those enterprises that were drawing crowds. Or, you could steal a page from the other team's playbook by conducting a little marketing research, and if you discovered that students flock to the economics booth because they believe it provides the most assured means of making a good living, you could begin to market your English major by trumpeting the high premium multinational corporations were now placing on graduates with superb writing and analytical skills, and flog a Near Eastern Language degree by emphasizing that modern security and intelligence needs were now creating a huge demand for specialists in Arabic languages or Farsi. Or you might respond by trying to convene a meeting of your fellow academic entrepreneurs to persuade them that the good of the whole depends on a more equitable distribution of customers among the various booths and that all of you, collectively, ought to devise means of forcing customers to pass through booths to which they might not otherwise give more than a glance as they walked by.

You may recognize this last option as an intentionally cynical description of the liberal education model you find in institutions like this one. What makes it cynical is that it posits the aim of education as primarily a matter of keeping the customers flowing through the various educational shops: The aim of the philosophy major is to make sure there are philosophy majors, and a liberal education serves this aim by making sure that enough students flow through philosophy classes to allow for the possibility of persuading a few of them to make philosophy a destination rather than a way station. This would explain why liberal education might be good for philosophy, but it wouldn't make it particularly clear why philosophy may be good for us.

You have no doubt noticed my ample use of somewhat crude market-related metaphors in these remarks so far, and this is far from accidental. It is also no coincidence that the novel I've mentioned above, James's *The American*, which takes as its hero a self-made millionaire, was first published in 1877 during the era we commonly refer to as the Gilded Age—an era that itself got its label from the title of another novel, this one cowritten by Charles Dudley Warner and Mark Twain and published in 1873. *The Gilded Age* (the novel) is a broad—sometimes hilarious, sometimes painful—satire on the speculative excesses that swept the nation in the wake of the Civil War. The laying down of thousands and thousands of miles of railroad tracks (these were the years in which the transcontinental railroad was completed) touched off real estate speculation that led to an overvaluing of property, creating immense wealth for some and immediate poverty for others. The millionaire and multimillionaire, whose wealth derived from the railroads, oil, commodities trading, and the like, took up residence in the national imagination and became a prominent figure in directing national and world affairs.

Likewise the modern corporation, partially as a result of the U.S. Supreme Court's interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, began rapidly transforming the economic life of the nation, leading one scholar to refer to this period as marking the "incorporation of America."¹ During these years, the U.S. Congress was known more for its scandalous behavior, cowardice, and cupidity than for its statesmanship. Accordingly towards the end of Twain and Warner's novel, a character, appropriately named Mr. Noble, who has just exposed a member of the U.S. Senate for bribery only to find that the other Senators are unlikely to pursue any punishment, cries out in indignation, "You know as well as I do that the whole nation holds as much as three-fifths of the United States Senate in entire contempt."² In short, according to Twain and Warner, the Gilded Age was a period when the accumulation of immense wealth by private individuals, with the collusion and sanction of those whose responsibility was to guard the public good, became the defining aim of the nation.

So let's review the score sheet: private wealth growing in both size and influence, overvalued real estate, court rulings in favor of corporate rights, cronyism in the federal government. That sounds like 1870, but it also may sound a bit like 2007. Indeed, according to some, it sounds exactly like 2007, and these critics have dubbed the period in which we've been living since the mid-1990s as the New Gilded Age. For example, ten years ago this fall, *The Baffler* magazine sponsored a national lecture and discussion series called "Business and the American Mind," which included a session entitled "The New Gilded Age." The program's announcement stated the following:

The defining fact of American culture in the 1990s is its reorganization around the needs of the corporation. While Americans have always rallied around the titans of industry during prosperous times, never before has business managed to colonize popular imagination to such a remarkable degree. From the showplaces of advertising to the pronouncements of pundits,

from the exalted realm of orthodox academic economics to the common wisdom of the street; the market seems to have supplanted politics, the office has become society, and the brand has been made an equivalent to human identity. As income disparities grow and the vicissitudes of the Dow eclipse the weather as smalltalk [sic] of choice, the only social justice anyone feels confident about is supposed to come through the agency of personal computers— office machines. Not only is the business of America business, the culture of America is business too.³

Echoing *The Baffler*, Paul Krugman, an economist and columnist for the *New York Times*, remarked on the increase in income inequality that characterizes both Gilded Ages, noting, “Well, in at least one respect, everything old is new again. Income inequality— which began rising at the same time that modern conservatism began gaining political power—is now fully back to Gilded Age levels.” But I should pause here to note that Krugman’s mention of “modern conservatism” makes explicit something that has been implicit in my comments and examples so far, namely the inescapably “political” dimension of any discussion about the role of wealth in shaping the affairs of the nation. Krugman observes that the late Milton Friedman, one of this university’s many Nobel laureates, and Grover Norquist, architect of the Bush administration’s tax cutting policies, “have portrayed the Gilded Age as a golden age, dismissing talk of the era’s injustice and cruelty as a left-wing myth.”⁴ There may be no way of talking about these matters without someone’s political ox getting gored. But that’s precisely the reason we need to talk about them.

In the article from which I have been quoting, Krugman also mentions one Gilded Age figure for the purpose of comparison with today’s economic moguls. That figure is John D. Rockefeller, who was an oil magnate, the richest man in the world in 1890, and, more to the point, also the University of Chicago’s founder, whose memory is honored by the name of this chapel in which we are gathered today—a chapel that stands as a testament to the belief that learning, faith, and money need not be at odds with one another. I won’t have the opportunity in the time allotted to me today to remark on the relationship of learning to faith, a topic very much on the mind of many at the present moment and very much worthy of some lengthy consideration. Instead I’ll have to content myself with Rockefeller’s hope that great wealth could serve great learning. In this hope, Rockefeller was hardly unique in his time. Other very rich men, including Leland Stanford, who founded Stanford University in 1891 with wealth amassed largely through his founding of the Central Pacific Railroad Company, and Andrew Carnegie, who founded Carnegie Mellon University in 1900 with a fortune built on Pittsburgh Steel, believed that wealth might find its true realization in great institutions of learning.

Taking these men together, one could say that their lives illustrate that the ends or aims of the private accumulation of wealth was to create institutions to serve the larger good. To be sure, these men had to devote considerable time at the front end of their lives to the business of accumulation, which was often a nasty affair, requiring on occasion the bankrupting or stifling

of one's competitors, the sweating of one's workers, or the expropriating of the property of those less wealthy or profitable than oneself. It was not for nothing that Rockefeller, Stanford, and these others were known as robber barons. But if at the end of the day, one could point to something like a campus on the South Side of Chicago, tricked out in impressive Gothic architecture, that had, in the span of only a decade, come to be known as one of the most prestigious institutions of higher education in the world, well, then, you just might be able to call your accounts square—and maybe, just maybe, when you consider that Rockefeller's philanthropic efforts went well beyond the University of Chicago and included, among other things, helping to found Spelman College for African American women—maybe you could even come out a little ahead.

So, if the aim of the private accumulation of great wealth is to create institutions, like this one—that is, institutions that serve the larger good—then it would follow that the end or aim of the education offered in an institution like this one is to serve the larger good. So, there you have it: The aim of education is to serve the larger good. Period. End of story. I could probably drop in the University's motto at this juncture, "Let knowledge grow from more to more; and so be human life enriched," and take a bow, and we could all be on our way, with me not even halfway through the time I've been allotted. This is the kind of efficiency that might have made old Rockefeller himself proud.

In truth, I'd love to stop here, but something won't let me apply the brakes. And that something happens to be this notion of "the greater good." Just what is it, and how is it to be reckoned? Is it a simple numerical calculation? If not, who gets to determine it? These questions are particularly pertinent given that one assumption these men made in constructing their empires was that some level of inequality was compatible with, and even necessary to, the achievement of the higher ends represented by education and culture. Carnegie, in his well-known essay, "Wealth," which was retitled and more popularly circulated as "The Gospel of Wealth," wrote:

The contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer with us to-day measures the change which has come with civilization.

This change, however, is not to be deplored, but welcomed as highly beneficial. It is well, nay, essential for the progress of the race, that the houses of some should be homes for all that is highest and best in literature and the arts, and for all the refinements of civilization, rather than that none should be so.⁵

With Carnegie's words in mind, the question I'd have to put to these robber barons is that if by their own admission the private accumulation of wealth requires great disparities that presume a "contrast between the palace of the millionaire and the cottage of the laborer," then how

does this count as the greater good? Or to ask the question somewhat differently, might there be a good greater than this greater good?

Carnegie's answer is no—at least not in the world in which he operates. For him, the only imaginable alternative to a world in which some have a lot and others only a little is a world in which everyone is stuck with only a little. As he writes:

But even if we admit . . . that it is a nobler ideal that man should labor, not for himself alone, but in and for a brotherhood of his fellows, and share with them all in common, realizing Swedenborg's idea of Heaven, where, as he says, the angels derive their happiness, not from laboring for self, but for each other,—even admit all this, and a sufficient answer is, This is not evolution, but revolution. It necessitates the changing of human nature itself a work of aeons, even if it were good to change it, which we cannot know. It is not practicable in our day or in our age. Even if desirable theoretically, it belongs to another and long-succeeding sociological stratum. Our duty is with what is practicable now; with the next step possible in our day and generation. It is criminal to waste our energies in endeavoring to uproot, when all we can profitably or possibly accomplish is to bend the universal tree of humanity a little in the direction most favorable to the production of good fruit under existing circumstances. We might as well urge the destruction of the highest existing type of man because he failed to reach our ideal as favor the destruction of Individualism, Private Property, the Law of Accumulation of Wealth, and the Law of Competition; for these are the highest results of human experience, the soil in which society so far has produced the best fruit. Unequally or unjustly, perhaps, as these laws sometimes operate, and imperfect as they appear to the Idealist, they are, nevertheless, like the highest type of man, the best and most valuable of all that humanity has yet accomplished.⁶

This is quite a statement and much can be said about it, but for now I'll paraphrase it as follows in regard to the goals of this evening's lecture: According to Carnegie, who I'll take as speaking for his fellow philanthropist/ millionaires, the aim of private higher education is to demonstrate that the conditions conducive to the private accumulation of wealth produce achievements and goods that are unmatched by any other imaginable system. And since this will be an important point that we'll have to test, I'll repeat it: the aim of private higher education is to demonstrate that the conditions conducive to the private accumulation of wealth produce achievements and goods that are unmatched by any other imaginable system. And for good measure I'll rephrase it more crudely: "Sure," Carnegie says, "we may have more poverty than some of you think is justifiable but as a consequence we also have some of the best universities in the world." At this moment perhaps both you and I are wishing that I'd found the brake when I hit upon "the greater good" answer, which sounded so much more uplifting.

If it seemed cynical for me to suggest earlier that the aim of a liberal arts education is to make sure that there are enough customers for the various humanities disciplines that might otherwise not draw very well on their own, now I'm saying that the aim of having a topflight philosophy department or history department or whatever is to demonstrate the superiority of our system of capital accumulation, despite its flaws, over any other system. This would not be because these departments as such are interested directly in providing such a justification, but rather because we know that societies are measured by their capacity to produce topflight intellectuals.

Thus, if we want our society to be deemed a worthy one, we have to produce a requisite number of topflight intellectuals. On this view, it doesn't much matter what these intellectuals actually do, only that they be acknowledged as topflight. Once again though, if part of my purpose here is to inspire you, I have to confess that so far I don't think I've done a very good job. Nonetheless I'm asking for your patience because, as so often happens in melodramatic narratives in which good and evil do battle, the hero (who is, in this context, inspiration) is sure to show up just in the nick of time. In the meantime, though, we also have to figure out whether or not what I've said about the aim of education is: (A) True; (B) Ideology; (C) A description of the Chicago economics department; (D) All of the above; or (E) None of the above. (And I bet no one told you there was going to be a quiz tonight.)

Before moving on to answer this question, though, I think it's important to add a little more by way of context. The monumental philanthropic efforts that led not only to the founding of the great universities I have mentioned, but also to the development of modern philanthropy itself were not produced ab ovo from the minds of these titans themselves. Rather, these philanthropic ventures were at least in part responses to the fact that the unprecedented growth of the new economy of the Gilded Age had also produced significant immiserization among members of the working population, many of whom did indeed believe that there might be a viable alternative to the capitalist order that was in the process of securing its dominance. Carnegie, in composing "Wealth," was writing explicitly against the doctrines of socialism and communism and the fear that these ideas might find adherents not only among the working classes but also among the educated classes. Secondly, as attested to by the number of authors during the first Gilded Age who noted the mesmerizing appeal of accumulation for the sake of accumulation, these efforts were occurring at a moment when, in the eyes of many observers, the American genius of making lots of money had not demonstrated its capacity to do much beyond accumulate heretofore unimaginable amounts of capital.

For example, in describing Christopher Newman, the hero of *The American*, Henry James writes:

It must be admitted, rather nakedly, that Christopher Newman's sole aim in life had been to make money; what he had been placed in the world for was, to his own perception, simply to

wrest a fortune, the bigger the better, from defiant opportunity. This idea completely filled his horizon and satisfied his imagination. Upon the uses of money upon what one might do with a life into which one had succeeded in injecting the golden stream, he had to up to his thirtyfifth year very scantily reflected. Life had been for him an open game, and he had played for high stakes. He had won at last and carried off his winnings; and now what to do with them?⁷

In a similar vein, W. E. B. DuBois, writing in 1903, warned southern Americans that:

Atlanta must not lead the South to dream of material prosperity as the touchstone of all success; already the fatal might of this idea is beginning to spread; it is replacing the finer type of Southerner with vulgar money-getters; it is burying the sweeter beauties of Southern life beneath pretence and ostentation. For every social ill the panacea of Wealth has been urged,—wealth to overthrow the remains of the slave feudalism; wealth to raise the “cracker” Third Estate; wealth to employ the black serfs, and the prospect of wealth to keep them working; wealth as the end and aim of politics, and as the legal tender for law and order; and, finally, instead of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness, wealth as the ideal of the public school.⁸

And here is Henry James again, in his 1903 book, *The American Scene*, which he wrote after returning to the United States following an absence of some twenty years, describing the New York City skyscrapers:

Crowned not only with no history, but with no credible possibility of time for history, and consecrated by no uses save the commercial at any cost, they are simply the most piercing notes in that concert of the expensively provisional into which your supreme sense of New York resolves itself. They never begin to speak to you, in the manner of the builded majesties of the world as we have heretofore known such—towers or temples or fortresses or palaces—with the authority of things of permanence or even of things of long duration. One story is good only till another is told, and sky-scrappers are the last word of economic ingenuity only till another word be written.⁹

I could go on, but I hope you see the point. Taken together, these passages reveal that in the eyes of some of the most astute cultural observers at the time, the genius of the American economic order had yet to demonstrate itself capable of producing a culture capable of rivaling those of the feudal, aristocratic, and paternalistic societies that had preceded it.

This may be a criticism that is a little bit difficult to credit at this moment early in the 21st century when many are inclined to speak of U.S. cultural dominance, and scholars and intellectuals from around the world flock to our shores. Nonetheless, for many expatriate and virtually expatriate writers and artists from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries, the United States did not offer conditions necessary to any aims higher than those of Wall Street or Main Street. So the ability of American wealth to justify itself by adducing

evidence that it was interested in aims other than its own aggrandizement has been a very recent phenomenon, and institutions like the University of Chicago have played no small role in establishing the basis for this justification.

But this might be a good time to go back to my quiz, which asked whether the second claim I've made about the aim of education is (A) True; (B) Ideology; (C) A description of the Chicago economics department; (D) All of the above; or (E) None of the above. Well, among the first things you'll learn here is that truth and ideology are at once different things and the same thing. We usually think of truth as referring to the way things in the world really are and ideology as referring to the way some interested party claims things in the world ought to be, despite evidence to the contrary. Truth, we like to say, is a matter of fact, and ideology is a matter of value. What makes the distinction difficult to sustain, though, is that ideology also denotes the way that ideas work in and on the world, shaping the reality around us. Truths change, and they do so often as a result of the efforts of people armed with ideas and beliefs to change reality. For example, a shared conviction of many Gilded Age novelists was that the practice of novel writing had to change because the reality that these novelists were charged with representing was changing around them, and if novels derived their authority from the accuracy of their representations of how humans behaved in the world, then novelists were going to have to persuade their readers that their stories accurately represented the way economic forces were changing human behavior. A novel that seemed perfectly adequate to the world of 1855 might feel antiquated in the world of 1875.

Of course, the world around us is not infinitely accommodating of the ideas we have about it, or of our desires for it to be one way rather than another, or of the representations we make of it. Reality pushes back, and it is at this point of push back that truth and ideology often part company—the place where the world will not conform to our desire.

But I've delayed too long in deciding the possible correctness of options (A) and (B); and, as you've probably guessed, I'm going to say that both (A) and (B) are at least a little correct. Certainly in the views of their founders, these major universities were created in part to vindicate the wealth that had produced them, so my assertion that the aim of education is to justify the conditions that conduce to the private accumulation of wealth does have some claim on historical truth. What makes this statement ideological though (ideological, that is, in the sense of being a statement that attempts to represent the University in a certain way for my own ends) is that it is somewhat reductive. After all, every one of these universities has been home to scholars representing a variety of viewpoints, many of which are and have been critical of the prevailing order and of the conditions that produced it. What makes a great university great is that once you put it together by saying to the philosophers, "I don't care what you do as long as you are regarded by those who know philosophy as doing it better than anyone else in the world," you inevitably open up the possibility that your philosophers will say things that you don't like—things that bring into question the truths and justifications you think they

ought to be affirming. So if it were correct to say that the aim of higher education is to justify the material conditions of its production, it would also be correct to say that the aim of higher education is to create conditions that allow for the criticism of the conditions of private accumulation, and of everything else under the sun. So much for options (A) and (B).

What about option (C): the possibility that my assertion is merely a description of the Chicago economics department? Here I'm on dangerous turf indeed. Not only will a plurality of the students in this audience become economics majors (I'm also proud to say that not an insubstantial number of you will become English majors), but, as you all know, as measured by Nobel Prizes and other awards conferred, ours is the best economics department in the world and is one of the best departments at this university. There's another mundane reason I ought to tread carefully here: the most direct indoor route from my office in the English department to the nearest coffee shop takes me first through the economics department and then through the philosophy department. (It may be that my coffee habit also explains why the philosophy department has loomed so large in my examples here.) So, if I don't want to get waylaid by disgruntled colleagues when I shamble down the hallway in pursuit of a cup of decaf, I'd better watch what I say.

It is certainly true that much of the current and most respected work that has come out of our economics department has provided arguments or evidence supporting policies that favor private enterprise over government intervention in many areas of human endeavor. The debate about privatizing Social Security, for example, is taking place not only in the halls of Congress but also in the scholarly papers written by Chicago scholars. And if Carnegie argued in the early 20th century that inequality was necessary for human progress, our Nobel Prize-winning economics professor Gary S. Becker has recently argued in a paper coauthored with Kevin M. Murphy that "an increase in earnings inequality due primarily to higher rates of return on education and other skills [should] be considered a favorable rather than an unfavorable development" because "[h]igher rates of return on capital are a sign of greater productivity in the economy, and that inference is fully applicable to human capital as well as to physical capital. The initial impact of higher returns to human capital is wider inequality in earnings (the same as the initial effect of higher returns on physical capital), but that impact becomes more muted and may be reversed over time as young men and women invest more in their human capital."¹⁰

Of course one professor does not a department make, nor one quotation an argument. Professor Becker's article, for example, does not say that all inequality is good or that we shouldn't be concerned about the nature, duration, or the degree of inequality. Neither do his views represent those of every professor in the economics department, some of whom have addressed inequality in a variety of ways. But the crucial point to be made here is that Professor Becker is not making this argument simply because he would like it to be true. He is making it because he believes that the data, evidence, and methodology employed demonstrate it to be

true regardless of what he or anyone else may want to believe. So then, to return to my quiz, option (C), which posits that the vindication of private accumulation stands as a description of the economics department, is not quite right if this statement means to suggest that some of the professors in that department are willing to insist on this conclusion come hell or high water. Rather, the conclusions reached by these scholars are a function of the methodological operations they employ. As the economics department Web site states quite eloquently regarding its various areas of emphases, “The unifying thread in all this is not political or ideological but methodological, the methodological conviction that economics is an incomparably powerful tool for understanding society.”¹¹ It is true that some skeptical observer might want to say that if your methodology repeatedly produces conclusions that conform to the idea of the world you find most congenial, then there might be reason to question your ability to distinguish between method and ideology—what, after all, is meant by that wonderful phrase “methodological conviction?” This objection, however, raises more questions than I can pursue at present.

But finally to finish up my quiz, it seems that answers (A), (B), and (C) are each partly right and partly wrong, which would then make answers (D) “All of the above” and (E) “None of the above” also partly right and partly wrong. So it’s all a muddle: I haven’t given you fully persuasive reasons to discount my cynical formulation of the aim of higher education, nor have I given you fully persuasive reasons to buy it. But don’t despair—I promised to get us back on a more inspiring track, and I mean to make good on this promise before I finish. And to do so, first I’ll take you back a half step to the marvelous audacity of the statement that I quoted from the website of the economics department: “. . . the methodological conviction that economics is an incomparably powerful tool for understanding society.” In addition to “conviction,” the words that stand out for me are “incomparably powerful.” The members of the department could have described economics as a “very useful” tool, a “pretty damn good tool,” or “one of many necessary tools” for understanding society, but they decided instead to swing for the fences and go with “incomparably powerful tool.” It would follow, then, that they hold the tools employed by other disciplines to explain human behavior to be comparably less powerful. I, frankly, think they have every right to make this claim, not because I’m sure I agree with it but because I think it is useful as a guide to what the aim of education ought to be at the present moment.

Simply put, this aim is to get you to entertain the possibility that there might be tools—some new, some perhaps out of fashion—for understanding society that are possibly better than the ones we are now employing. Of course, in order for you to determine what makes one tool better or worse than another, you must first understand the nature of the tools currently in use. This necessity is what makes a liberal education the valuable thing it is. It requires that you gain more than a passing acquaintance with the methods that define inquiry in different fields so that you can get a sense of both their scope and their limitations. More precisely this is also what makes the idea of the Core Curriculum at Chicago so valuable. The Core is premised in

part on the conviction that there are key critical skills necessary not only to prepare you to master a discipline once you've decided which one you'd like to take up but also to give you the capacity to view your chosen discipline from a point a little bit outside of its claims and justifications. This "outsider perspective" is important because to believe in the incomparable power of a disciplinary methodology is to take ideas quite seriously. (And if there's anything that defines the University of Chicago, it is taking ideas seriously.) To take one's ideas seriously is to believe that they will produce good results when applied to the world. Ideas have consequences, and before you commit to these consequences you might indeed want to hear from the wielders of other methodological tools what they think about the understanding of society you claim to have confirmed.

You may or may not know that in the 1940s the Carnegie Corporation, using the work of sociologists trained at the University of Chicago, commissioned a massive study of U.S. race relations, under the direction of Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal. Titled *An American Dilemma*, this study shaped American racial policy for the next several decades. You may or may not know that in the 1970s after the Chilean coup by Augusto Pinochet a "group of economists known as 'the Chicago boys' because of their attachment to the neoliberal theories of Milton Friedman, then teaching [here] at the University of Chicago, was summoned to help reconstruct the Chilean economy."¹² You may or may not know that one of Paul Bremer's goals in Iraq as stated in the "Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 39: Foreign Investment" was to assist in the "transition from a non-transparent centrally planned economy to a market economy characterized by sustainable economic growth through the establishment of a dynamic private sector, and the need to enact institutional and legal reforms to give it effect."¹³ You may not, until now, have known about these things, but, after you have learned about them, how you assess the consequences that ensued from those attempts to put ideas into action will depend on your certainty that these were indeed the best ideas available.

I'm not prepared to declare the novels I study and teach "incomparably powerful tools for understanding society." I think they happen to be pretty good ones, though. For example, one can take another Gilded Age novel, Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, which imaginatively transports its protagonist, Hank Morgan, who is a foreman in a 19th-century weapons factory, into the medieval world of King Arthur's Court, with the dream of reconstructing that society on the basis of democratic government, technological innovation, and free-market principles. The power and genius of the novel derive from Twain's ability to have the satire cut both ways, exposing both the limits and cruelties of the society Morgan wishes to reform as well as the hubris and blindness of the society that thinks itself better than all others. I won't say much more for fear of spoiling it for those who've not yet read it, but I do have to say that things, of course, do not go well for Hank who finds himself trapped in a prison of his own making. Twain is far from having the last word about how to think about restructuring a society other than one's own, but he does have insights worth considering for

anyone who finds herself or himself faced with the decision of whether or not to support such an effort.

The challenges awaiting you at the University of Chicago are the challenges posed by powerful ideas, some of which were produced with the aim of bringing the whole of human action into their ambit. Our shared responsibility is to gain the capacity to understand these ideas, to critique them, and, when necessary, to wield them with wisdom and self-reflection. And beyond this, it also falls to us to contemplate the possibility of, and to assist in the creation of, new ideas so that we, like James's Christopher Newman, but without the burden of having to pile up riches beforehand, can give way to the "vague sense that more answers were possible than [our philosophies] had hitherto dreamt of." There, I hope you're feeling a little better now.

I want to thank you again for your attention and patience. Please accept my best wishes for your future here at the University of Chicago.

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4. Paul Krugman, "Gilded Once More," *New York Times* (April 27, 2007).
<http://select.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/opinion/27krugman.html>
5. Andrew Carnegie, "Wealth," *North American Review* CCCXCL.391 (June, 1889), p. 653.
6. *Ibid.* p. 656.
7. Henry James, *The American*, ed. James W. Tuttleton (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 32.
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9. James, *The American Scene*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 77.
10. Gary S. Becker and Kevin M. Murphy, "The Upside of Income Inequality," *The American: A Magazine of Ideas* (May/June 2007). <http://www.american.com/archive/2007/may-june-magazine-contents/the-upside-of-income-inequality>

11. The University of Chicago Department of Economics, "About the Department."
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12. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 6.

13. See Harvey, p. 6, and Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 39: Foreign Investment, CPA/ORD/19 September 2003/39.
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