

The Wisdom of Clichés: Liberal Learning and the Burden of Originality

Kevin Gary
Goshen College

Perhaps the most important lesson that a liberal arts education seeks to convey is this: do not be trite; avoid clichés; think for yourself.¹ It is striking to consider the sheer number of disparate thinkers (modern, postmodern, and contemporary) for whom this is axiomatic. The likes of Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean Paul Sartre, Ayn Rand, Richard Rorty, among others, all prompt us to break with tradition and convention, to trust our own experience, to see things for ourselves, anew, to be autonomous, authentic, an *Übermensch*, an ironist, anything but unoriginal. In their view, education should forge independent thinkers who stand critical and skeptical of traditional, proverbial, or conventional ways of seeing and living. The skepticism of what has come before has become, in some ways, the *raison d'être* of the modern research university.

The question is this: Does this focus on autonomy and originality miss something important? I think it does. In this essay I contend that rather than being original, we are better served by embracing the wisdom of certain clichés. Rather than banal, empty truisms, certain clichés can be prompts for thoughtful self-examination and wise action. Clichés are prominent and pedagogically significant within wisdom traditions. More than inform, or offer “new” knowledge, clichés are formative, helping situate a person “within the fundamental disposition” she aspires “to live into.”² We are, however, conditioned by culture (and its fetish for the innovative) and by the liberal arts ideal of autonomy to reject anything that smacks of being clichéd. This pedagogical and conditioned aversion does us a great disservice. Rather than being educated to reject clichéd thinking and living outright, the pedagogical task should be one of equipping students to critically discern which clichés are the right clichés, embracing those that are constitutive of a wisdom tradition.³

CLICHÉS AND THE IDEAL OF AUTHENTICITY

The word cliché originates from the French, from the context of the printing press. Clichés originally were phrases cast from movable type. When letters were set one at a time, it was more efficient to cast a phrase that was used repeatedly as a single piece of metal. Thus cliché came to refer to stock phrases that were used over and over again. Not originally intended as a pejorative, the meaning of the term cliché has clearly evolved. Consider the following definitions from *Merriam-Webster*:

1. “a phrase or expression that has been used so often that it is no longer original or interesting”;
2. “something that is so commonly used in books, stories, etc., that it is no longer effective.”⁴

Note that the essential qualification for something being clichéd is overuse. Substance and meaning are irrelevant. It may be a truism, a witticism, or a clever misconception; what makes it a cliché is its characteristic of being tried too many times. Becoming clichéd is a process of decay by sheer repetition, whereby familiarity breeds contempt. Salvador Dalí illuminates this point: “The first man [*sic*] to compare the cheeks of a young woman to a rose was obviously a poet; the first to repeat it was possibly an idiot.”⁵ If an artist is guilty of repetition or a lack of originality, especially on a mass scale, she produces kitsch, cliché’s ugly twin. No matter how truthful, insightful, or beautiful a work of art or an expression may be, it receives Dalí’s and the Academy’s disdain if it bears the imprimatur of unoriginality.

Overuse is problematic because, as the second definition implies, it compromises the effectiveness of language; such expressions lose their punch for the listener and the user. We literally stop hearing the words, as mere filler words are used when we are at a loss for words. Hackneyed writing, George Orwell explains, “consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug.”⁶ This way of communicating is attractive because it is easy and even quicker because you do not “have to hunt about for the words.... [as clichés] will construct your sentences for you — even think your thoughts for you” (*PL*).

Language is effective insofar as it communicates and reveals meaning, both to the listener and the communicator. In doing the thinking for you, clichés perform “the important service of partially concealing” meaning from oneself (*PL*). Given to platitudes, we become subject to another’s frame. If language, as Martin Heidegger observed, is the house of Being, then we become captives in a house not of our own making — a house that we fail to really know.

Such hollow communication, Orwell notes, is especially characteristic of political hacks that mechanically repeat phrases. Removed from their own words, Orwell observes that it gives one the feeling that one is not watching a real human being, but some of kind of automaton. Parroting clichés or talking points ad nauseam he or she becomes a machine, with the brain of both the speaker and the listener becoming anaesthetized. This “reduced state of consciousness,” Orwell observes, “if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable [*sic*] to political [and religious] conformity” (*PL*).

The central problem with clichés, as Orwell cautions, is that they serve as a substitute for thinking for oneself. Students who fall back on clichés have not demonstrated that they grasp the meaning of a cliché being used. And to the extent that one relies on jargon and trite language, critical autonomy is in question. In short, clichéd thinking is not thinking, certainly not critical thinking. We must, Orwell cautions, constantly be on guard against this language rut. To combat it, Orwell’s says the first and most sacred rule for writing is this: “1. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print” (*PL*). In short, think for yourself. Be original. Own your words.

Yet more than simply a rule for writing, Orwell’s directive is constitutive of a larger ideal for living. Friedrich Nietzsche’s articulation in *Schopenhauer as*

Educator is representative: “At bottom every man [*sic*] knows well enough that he is a unique being, only once on this earth; and by no extraordinary chance will such a marvelously picturesque piece of diversity in unity as he is, ever be put together a second time.”⁷ Closer to home, Charles Taylor observes this ideal as a prominent part of our contemporary social landscape. Responding to Allan Bloom’s sharp critique of the relativism of college students, Taylor sees young people animated by and in pursuit of the “ideal of authenticity.” This ideal consists of the idea that

each of us has an original way of being human.... There is a certain way of being human that is my way. I am called to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what being human is for me.⁸

Rather than aimless relativism, Taylor sees an ethical imperative at work. If the oracle at Delphi’s mandate was “know thyself,” the mandate to authenticity is “be thyself.” Unoriginality compromises our humanity. Lord Henry Wotton in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illuminates this point further:

Because to influence a person is to give him one’s own soul. He does not think his natural thoughts, or burn with his natural passions. His virtues are not real to him. His sins, if there are such things as sins, are borrowed. He becomes an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him.⁹

Given the ideal of authenticity, rejecting clichés is more than just resisting a misuse of language or lethargic thinking; it is existential laziness. To be clichéd not only jeopardizes personal autonomy, but also personal authenticity or the full expression of one’s particular humanity.

THE ACADEMY MEETS ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS¹⁰

Given the dangers thus outlined, what possible defense can be made on behalf of clichés? They betray thinking for oneself, anesthetize consciousness, inculcate blind conformity, and undermine full human expression. They are, it seems, the antithesis of critical thinking, the hallmark of liberal learning. This perspective is shared by Geoffrey Day, one of the key protagonists in David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*.¹¹ A child of the Academy, he embodies its signature ways of thinking and being, yet Day is also a drug addict. The tools of a liberal arts education have not equipped him to deal with this moral failing. Unwillingly, yet with no other recourse, Day turns to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). His initial assessment of this program is dismissive. What he finds particularly jarring are the platitudes that permeate the recovery program. With resignation he reflects:

so then at 46 years of age I came here to learn to live by clichés.... To turn my will and life over to the care of clichés. One day at a time. Easy does it. First things first. Courage is fear that has said its prayers. Ask for help. Thy will not mine be done. It works if you work it. Grow or go. Keep coming back. (*IJ*, 270)

Day is repelled by these banal truisms. Landing in AA, with its tired jargon, is a low point, not simply because of his moral failing, but because of the clichés he has to endure. Given his sophistication, he holds in suspicion “the idea that something so simple and, really, so aesthetically uninteresting ... can actually be nourishing in a way that arch, meta, ironic ... stuff can’t.”¹² Sensing Day’s urbane disdain, fellow AA member Charlotte Treat, says that he needs an “attitude of gratitude,” for a “grateful

heart will never drink” (*IJ*, 270–71). Somewhat chafed by this suggestion, Day parses the phrase, saying that ““since organs can’t properly be said to imbibe and I’m still afflicted with just enough self-will to decline to live by utter non sequiturs, as opposed to just good old clichés, I’m taking the liberty of light amendment”” (*IJ*, 271). Charlotte, hoping for reinforcement of AA protocol, instead receives nuance, sarcasm, and willfulness.

Reflecting on *Infinite Jest* in an interview, Wallace explains that AA is particularly challenging for educated people like Day who struggle “with the fact that the AA system is teaching them fairly deep things through these seemingly simplistic clichés.”¹³ Day’s liberal education has predisposed him against the simplistic in favor of the complex and the original. Commenting on the essential aim of liberal learning, James Freedman offers this apt summary, “a liberal education ought to make a person independent of mind, skeptical of authority and received views, prepared to forge an identity for himself or herself, and capable of becoming an individual not bent upon copying other persons.”¹⁴ Day embodies this spirit, but in this context it proves to be an obstacle, rather than an asset. The Academy has immunized him from an ability to appreciate, recognize, and really understand what is happening in AA. Day’s liberal education for autonomy impedes his ability to accept and submit to the wisdom of the clichés.

But where does this leave critical thinking? If embracing such clichés requires uncritical submission is critical thinking thereby undermined? Wallace’s narrative suggests otherwise. Don Gately, another key protagonist from *Infinite Jest*, shares Day’s tendency to intellectualize and balk at the platitudes of AA. Yet in spite of his intellectual proclivities, Gately is able to commit to the program. He stays the course. He works the work, embracing the clichés of AA without fully understanding or appreciating them. Eventually his critical assessment of AA begins to transform. He comes to understand the practical wisdom and insight of the program mediated through clichés. Reflecting on the process he observes:

And the palsied newcomers who totter in desperate and miserable enough to Hang In and keep coming and start feebly to catch beneath the unlikely insipid surface of the thing, Don Gately’s found, then get united by a second common experience. The shocking discovery that the thing actually does seem to work. Does keep you Substance-free. It’s improbable and shocking.... The idea that AA might actually work unnerved him. (*IJ*, 349)

Gately’s way of thinking is changed by his way of living. He is not able, at this point, to fully explain how

just sitting on hemorrhoid-hostile folding chairs every night looking at nose-pores and listening to clichés could work. Nobody’s ever been able to figure AA out, is another binding commonality. And the folks with serious time in AA are infuriating about questions starting with How. You ask the scary old guys How AA Works and they smile their chilly smiles and say Just Fine. It just works, is all; end of story. The newcomers who abandon common sense and resolve to Hang In and keep coming and then find their cages all of a sudden open, mysteriously. (*IJ*, 349)

Where, though, does Gately stand with respect to the dangers of clichés previously outlined, including failing to think for oneself, anesthetization of consciousness, blind conformity, and loss of authenticity? Like Day, Gately begins the AA process

with a stubborn will, resisting conformity. Yet at some point, he decides to conform to the protocols, suspend thinking for himself, and refrains from deconstructing the clichés. Trusting the authority of AA elders he embraces the program. He recounts his experience as follows:

And so you Hang In and stay sober and straight.... and when people with AA time strongly advise you to keep coming you nod robotically and keep coming, and you sweep floors and scrub out ashtrays and fill stained steel urns with hideous coffee, and you keep getting ritually down on your knees every morning and night asking for help from a sky that still seems a burnished shield against all who would ask aid of it — how can you pray to a “God” you believe only morons believe in, still? — but the old guys say it doesn’t yet matter what you believe or don’t believe, Just Do It they say. (*IJ*, 349)

Gately’s conformity, while perhaps initially blind, becomes clear-sighted and intentional. Gately comes to realize that something “as banal and reductive as ‘One Day at a Time’ enable[s] these people [and himself] to walk through hell.”¹⁵ He discovers that “in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have life-or-death importance.”¹⁶ What initially seemed so “lame and unexciting on the surface, actually expresses” great truth.¹⁷ What appear to Gately at first to be banal clichés he now realizes are in fact wisdom proverbs.

Given Gately’s progression, the apparent conflict between uncritical submission and critical thinking takes on a different cast. While there is suspension of critical thinking, this enables Gately to have an experience that eventually expands his critical thinking. Whether this submission is necessarily illiberal depends upon the kind of tradition one is initiated into.¹⁸ The AA tradition, which values honesty, openness, and criticality, particularly toward oneself, empowers its adherents with certain tools (most notably clichés and testimonies) to embark on a process of thoroughgoing self-examination. The practices of AA serve a liberal end. Gately’s critical thinking, rather than diminished, becomes sharper, as it is informed by an experiential wisdom he could not surmise from the outside.

While Gately had an idea of what living sober might look like, he was not able to understand viscerally and affectively what it entailed, prior to his actually living it out. On this point, Søren Kierkegaard diagnoses the limits of rationality, particularly as it tries to understand an alternative way of life.¹⁹ The clichés that constitute and serve as guideposts into this alternative way of life are not logical propositions that one can either rationally agree or disagree with. Gately’s entry into the wisdom of the AA tradition requires a leap of faith, a submission into the wisdom of AA clichés without full understanding. Rather than think his way into a new way of living, Gately has to live his way into a new way of thinking.²⁰

Recalling Orwell on the dangers of anesthetizing political jargon, uncritical submission may lead to diminished rather than enhanced critical thinking. The Nazis are the paradigm example of this phenomenon. Uncritical submission, in the Nazi case, serves an illiberal end and is therefore incompatible with critical thinking. Uncritical submission, however, may be morally defensible and compatible with critical thinking, as long as it leads to greater openness and critical self-awareness, which is true for Gately — the trajectory of the tradition makes all the difference. Does the tradition encourage questioning and provide tools for self-critique, which

Alasdair MacIntyre describes as a living tradition, or does it stifle questions and discourage critical examination? AA, I would contend, exemplifies a living tradition.

CLICHÉS AND WISDOM TRADITIONS

I now turn to the work of classical historian Pierre Hadot who illuminates further the role of clichés within a living tradition. Before doing so, the distinction between a proverb and a cliché needs further clarification. In defending the wisdom of clichés, I am defending the wisdom of certain clichés, the kind that frame wisdom traditions like AA, which, as noted, are more accurately described as proverbs. While every proverb can become a cliché, not every cliché is or should be a proverb. Some are morally repugnant, for example, “might makes right.” Others, like “a bird in hand is better than two in the bush,” are morally neutral. Proverbs, by distinction, seek to offer and incite wise action through poetic diction. They are poetically framed, seeking to refine the theoretical, systematic, and speculative insight of a wisdom tradition into a “highly concentrated nucleus, capable of exercising a strong psychological effect ... easy enough to handle so that it might always be kept close at hand” (WL, 267). Proverbs aim to “provide the mind with a small number of principles, tightly linked together” that derive “greater persuasive force and mnemonic effectiveness precisely” because of their formulaic and poetic form (WL, 267). These short sayings capture, often in “striking form, the essential dogmas, so that the student might easily relocate himself within the fundamental disposition in which he [*sic*] was to live” (WL, 267).

In light of this distinction between proverbs and clichés, I will now switch to using the more precise term, proverb, while recognizing that proverbs are often situated within the larger umbrella category of cliché, and are thereby at risk of being disregarded by modern liberal learning. This distinction aside, the question of authenticity remains. In submitting to a wisdom tradition and its proverbs, do we forsake the ideal of authenticity and become, as Wilde’s Lord Henry says, “an echo of someone else’s music, an actor of a part that has not been written for him [*sic*]”? Under such influence do we risk losing our “own soul,” and miss what it means to be human for me? Again, the burden of originality weighs heavy, as soul-making or soul-existence, in this view, depends upon originality. I think, however, there is false binary at work here that suggests a dubious either/or between a blind (and soul-less) conformity to a tradition, on the one hand, or an original (and soul-full) way of living, on the other.

Hadot, reflecting on Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*, offers illumination. *Meditations*, situated within the Stoic wisdom tradition, has endured while receiving mixed reviews from critics over the centuries. Many find it to be a derivative, unsystematic, and unoriginal work of philosophy. In this criticism, however, Hadot observes a categorical mistake. Aurelius’s *Meditations* (which Hadot says is better translated as *Exhortations to Himself*) seeks to *enact* rather than to *discourse* about philosophy — to live rather than theorize about a wisdom tradition. Instead of an original treatise (the modern standard of what counts as rigor), Aurelius’s exhortations demonstrate an existential rigor, as he strives to live into the very ideals he espouses. They are part of a tradition that Hadot describes as philosophy as a way of life in contrast to an understanding of philosophy as a way of thinking.

In Aurelius's exercises, Hadot notes, we "get to see someone in the process of training to become a human being" (WL, 201). Within this frame, we see how proverbs operate in a wisdom tradition. Engraved in Aurelius's memory, key proverbs are recited again and again throughout the text. Written as daily notes and briefly expanded upon, they serve as aids or prompts for Aurelius's daily examination of conscience (WL, 85). They constitute a "discourse that intends to form more than inform" (WL, 20). They facilitate critical self-examination and help him combat with himself.

Rather than a one-sided appropriation or blind submission to platitudes, Aurelius illustrates how critical engagement within a wisdom tradition, mediated through proverbs, involves learning how to have an edifying and critical conversation with oneself. While this process for the novice may be a simple going through the motions, for the more advanced it requires ongoing, conscious, and deliberate self-examination, as one seeks to live into the wisdom maxims. Herein resides space for authenticity, as the virtue of practical wisdom or *phronesis* is needed to apply particular proverbs to one's unique self and situation. The employment of proverbs in this context is far from the mindless parroting of clichés that Orwell warns us about. Interpretation and critical judgment are required, but this interpretative endeavor is qualitatively different from the inside than it is from the outside. Recall Day's sophisticated deconstruction of the AA proverbs that keeps him from fully embracing them.

Is this enough, though, to satisfy the demands of authenticity? I am not sure anything can. In its restless voracity for the new and original, the authenticity ideal risks being a snake that eats its own tail. Seeking to break free of the past, it discourages engagement with wisdom traditions, because they compromise originality. Yet its aspiration for originality misunderstands the nature of originality. Consider the craft of sculpture. A novice beginning this craft will bring intuitive ideas about how the work is done, including bad habits and wrongheaded notions that will need to be corrected. She will be taught in the forms and traditions of masters who precede her. Early questions and attempts at critical thinking, rather than illuminating, may be the wrong questions; they may lead to unfruitful tangents. Moreover, propositional answers to those questions may not, and perhaps cannot, communicate the way experience will. Thus, in the early stages an uncritical submission is required. Her initial creations will most certainly be imitative, yet if she is being initiated into a living tradition, she will be encouraged to own, assess, critique, and question the guiding norms of her craft, and through this process her original voice will begin to emerge.

Rather than *ex nihilo*, authenticity and originality emerge through the critical appropriation of a tradition (or traditions). Aurelius and Gately are active and original appropriators of their respective wisdom traditions. They witness how proverbs, rather than *passé* or tried clichés, are axioms one should try over and over and over again, so as to begin to glean their wisdom.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I see this aversion to clichés, prompted by the burden of originality, as a major weakness of modern liberal learning. In this regard, *Infinite Jest*

is pedagogically instructive as it illustrates how inept a liberally educated person can be at recognizing and embracing the precepts of a wisdom tradition. Returning to Orwell, I affirm the danger of clichés. Yet the problem is not with clichés per se or clichéd thinking, but rather with an education that teaches us to reject all clichés outright. Instead, the pedagogical task should be equipping students to discern which clichés are the right clichés, to distinguish banal, vapid clichés from wisdom clichés or proverbs that impart practical wisdom, assisting a learner into locating and relocating herself “within the fundamental disposition she aspires to live into.”

Referring to the four dominant schools of living in antiquity, including Aristotelianism, Platonism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism, Hadot describes them as “privileged fields for experimentation” — each offering a nucleus of proverbs for living well (*WL*, 273). To this list other notable wisdom traditions could be added that deserve serious experimentation. Modern liberal education, however, does not equip us with the capacity to recognize, adhere to, and live out daily proverbs. It does not cultivate the capacity to submit to a wisdom tradition and then critically and authentically appropriate it for oneself. Instead, liberal learning for autonomy risks alienating us from wisdom traditions not because they are not true but simply because they are trite.

1. I say modern liberal education, recognizing that the phrase “liberal education” — vague as it is — is a contested notion, ranging from more formative traditions of liberal learning that aim for some kind of virtue to the largely modern instantiation that disavows normative purposes, seeking rather to cultivate a neutral autonomy through critical thinking.

2. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 245. This work will be cited in the text as *WL* for all subsequent references.

3. In arguing for clichés I am not arguing against critical thinking. Rather, I make the case that critical thinking, burdened by the stress of originality, risks uncritically rejecting clichés that are valuable wisdom precepts, simply because they are clichéd.

4. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (online edition), s.v. “cliché,” noun, accessed August 15, 2014, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cliche>.

5. Salvador Dalí, preface to *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, by Pierre Cabanne (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1987), 13.

6. George Orwell’s, “Politics and the English Language (1946),” *New Republic*, accessed August 16, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/politics-and-the-english-language>. This work will be cited in the text as *PL* for all subsequent references.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thoughts Out of Season: The Use and Abuse of History; Schopenhauer As Educator V2*, trans. Adrian Collins, (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 103.

8. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 29. Taylor’s observations are descriptive not prescriptive. He does not advocate for the ideal of authenticity, but rather diagnoses its prevalence.

9. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, quoted in Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1997), 6.

10. I am especially grateful for several conversations with Dini Metro-Roland about David Foster Wallace.

11. David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (New York, NY: Back Bay Books, 1996). This work will be cited in the text as *IJ* for all subsequent citations.

12. “David Foster Wallace,” interview by Laura Miller, *Salon*, March 9, 1996, http://www.salon.com/1996/03/09/wallace_5/.

13. Ibid.

14. James O. Freedman, *Liberal Education and the Public Interest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 2003), 56.

15. See David Foster Wallace's 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Address, later published as David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, About Living a Compassionate Life* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

16. Ibid.

17. Miller and Wallace, "David Foster Wallace."

18. On this distinction see Bryan R. Warnick, "Ritual, Imitation and Education in R.S. Peters," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. S1 (2010): 57–74.

19. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).

20. Kierkegaard's leap of faith is sometimes criticized as succumbing to irrationality. Rather, it exposes the limits of rationality and the erroneous assumption that if one knows or understands an ethical or religious ideal, one is necessarily willing and able to accept, embrace, and live into it. See Paul L. Holmer, "Kierkegaard and Philosophy," in *New Themes in Christian Philosophy*, ed. Ralph M. McInerney (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 17.

This essay owes a debt of gratitude to the following friends for their careful edits and suggestions: Dini Metro-Roland, Mark Jonas, and Sam Rocha.