

**RESCUING SOCRATES: HOW THE GREAT BOOKS CHANGED MY LIFE  
AND WHY THEY MATTER FOR A NEW GENERATION.** By *Roosevelt  
Montás*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2021. Pp. 1, 225. \$24.95.

Reviewed by *Max Lykins\**

Debates about the “Western Canon” are not new, but they have taken on a new level of urgency—and vitriol—in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Is this canon a way to reinforce racist, misogynist, and colonial hierarchies? Or, like Thucydides’s claim that his *History* was a possession for all time, is it a collection of works that belongs to everyone and that forms the basis of humanistic inquiry? Roosevelt Montás’s *Rescuing Socrates*<sup>2</sup> is a defense of a liberal education structured around a canon of Great Books—the practice of reading texts and the claim that this practice is necessary for the human good.

Like reading a great novel, the value of a liberal education cannot be collapsed to arguments or proofs (p. 6). Accordingly, the book’s four chapters on texts from or about St. Augustine, Socrates, Freud, and Gandhi are paired with episodes from Montás’s own life and reflections on his experience as a teacher and director of Columbia’s Core Curriculum. The result is a successful and moving account of how reading great books can alter one’s life for the better. Montás has written a book that does not simply argue for a liberal education but demonstrates the experience of it.

Montás begins with St. Augustine’s *Confessions* and the turn inward to understand one’s self. Set within his own experience with an intense Pentecostal Christianity, the great Bishop of Hippo becomes a model for reflecting on questions of faith and self-knowledge. Montás’s encounter with Augustine begins with the *Confessions*’ (in)famous claim about the “sins of infancy,” where Augustine glosses an ostensibly innocuous action—newborn children crying for milk—as proof of humanity’s innate desire to

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1. See, e.g., Barbara Vobejda, *The Great Books Debate*, WASH. POST (Aug. 7, 1988), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1988/08/07/the-great-books-debate/4aa399e0-633f-4037-82c8-32b8a7bba073/> [<https://perma.cc/4MBE-8B2B>]. For more recent work on the debate surrounding the great-books curriculum, compare Johanna Hanink, *A New Path for Classics*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC. (Feb. 11, 2021), <https://www.chronicle.com/article/if-classics-doesnt-change-let-it-burn> [<https://perma.cc/SZM8-UCXM>] (“[L]ately some classicists have been working hard to set the study of classical antiquity on a new path. . . . Their work has shown, incontrovertibly, how ideas about ancient Greece and Rome have been used to authorize racist and other exclusionary practices and narratives. They are exposing how the academic discipline of classics is both a product of and longtime accomplice in violent societal structures, including white supremacy, colonialism, classism, and misogyny.”), with HEATHER MAC DONALD, *THE DIVERSITY DELUSION* 301 (2018) (“So totalitarian is the contemporary university that some professors wrote to Rollins complaining that his courses were too canonical in content and do not include enough of the requisite ‘silenced’ voices.”).

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dominate others. “Was I meant to take this seriously?” Montás wonders. “Or was I reading . . . an example of how blind faith can turn even a ‘great’ thinker into a simpleminded fanatic?” (p. 37). The larger question that reading Augustine raises is one of faith and its compatibility with an examined life. Montás ultimately leaves the Pentecostal church. Even so, his experience reflecting on—not dismissing—the great saint’s writing allows him a deeper appreciation: ancient articles of faith “often contain deep human truths, even if clothed in language we no longer understand or grounded on metaphysical assumptions we no longer share” (p. 55). One need not be an ancient bishop to understand Augustine’s concern with our boundless capacity for domination. Thus, Montás writes that “with the ancients—and with anyone, really—before a dismissal of what seems patently wrong, it is worth asking, ‘In what way are they right?’” (p. 55). This sets the tone for the rest of the book, and, indeed, is the basic guiding principle of a liberal education. In what way are the texts and thinkers that we encounter *right*? What larger truths do their writings help us see? And which authors can help us ponder those questions?

One of the book’s central themes—and the one I will focus the rest of this review on—is inclusion. Perhaps the most common, and surely the most pressing, objection to the sort of education that Montás defends is that it is exclusionary. Can a liberal education and its canonical curriculum escape such charges? If not, what are the consequences for cultivating reason and pursuing the human good, those traditional objects of liberal education?

Montás offers insightful and powerful answers to these questions. He begins by explaining his choice of authors:

Two ancients and two moderns. One African, two Europeans, and one Indian. A Christian saint, a pagan philosopher, a Jewish atheist, and a Hindu ascetic. A teacher of rhetoric who converted to Christianity . . . [A]n aristocrat whose young heart was conquered by philosophy . . . [A] researcher . . . who abandoned the lab . . . and a timid Indian lawyer who became a Mahatma, a Great Soul . . . (p. 7)

Highlighting the range of their lives, Montás deftly alerts us to the fact that these thinkers cannot be collapsed to a single aspect of their identity. They are too complex for that. These are major figures in the canon, yet even this briefest of examinations demonstrates a wide range of diversity.

Implicitly, this also raises the question of how we would reduce Augustine (say) to one dimension and on what grounds. If Augustine were read merely as an ancient, or a Christian, or a Roman, or an African, we would lose the ability to read him in other, meaningfully plural ways. The cost of missing a pluralistic reading is high. Even more troubling, it suggests a reader who does not come to the text for guidance, and who may even reject the text and the insights that come with it.

These readers are not imaginary, as Montás illustrates in his chapter on Gandhi. He uses the Mahatma's writings to defend liberal education against postmodern and deconstructionist challenges, which claim that universal categories are in fact empty ideas that serve only to dominate and repress.<sup>3</sup> There is an admittedly "intoxicating quality" to "ripping open . . . conceptual categories, canons, and hierarchies," Montás admits (p.190). But doing so undermines the possibility of truth and virtue—guiding values of a liberal education. "[I]f all that can be discovered behind notions like virtue, truth, and the human good are hierarchies of social power," he argues, "liberal education is at best an empty pursuit, at worst a bankrupt system for exploiting existing power structures" (pp. 190–91).

Montás thinks a liberal education can resist such charges. On his view, reading great texts helps us to find meaning in our lives by pointing us toward universals as a way to make sense of particulars.<sup>4</sup> Reading the *Apology*, Montás came to see that Socrates's "words were not just about something that had happened a long time ago to an old man in Greece. They had meaning for me right where I was and just as I was."<sup>5</sup> This is exactly what a liberal education strives for. An individual, in all their particularity, is able to make sense of their life by reading texts like the *Apology* because the text raises universal and fundamental human questions. Among Socrates's many questions, of course, were the sort of life a person should lead and how they could justify their most deeply held convictions. Montás notes the powerful effect these kinds of questions had in shaping his own character (p. 96). The value lies in the reflecting and the questioning, not in the answers. Reflecting and questioning have the beneficial effect of forming a character that recognizes one's historical contingency rather than centrality, thereby fostering a sense of humility and a touch of doubt that may help combat the innate desire to dominate that Augustine warns us about.

But many critics of the canon articulate the opposite approach. For them, affirming one's particular identity often means unmasking universals as mere dominance and erasure. Here, Montás points to Foucault and his "archaeologies of knowledge" that claimed to show how "moral, legal, and even scientific 'discourses' developed as tools for the exercise of social power" (p. 187). This "'critical' view . . . removes the possibility of making generalizable judgments about the ideas, texts, and debates that a liberal education curriculum should foreground" (p. 191).

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3. See pp. 182–95.

4. For a similar view, see Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Texts and Canons: The Status of the "Great Books" in Political Theory*, in 2 POLITICAL SCIENCE: THE STATE OF THE DISCIPLINE 3–26 (Ada W. Finifter ed., 1993).

5. P. 90. Montás goes on: "These questions from a decisive period in my development, and about a formative relationship for my sense of self, shape the character of my inner life; they are questions in whose tensions I improvise my daily existence, including the writing of this book." *Id.*

Montás argues, however, that universals are a source of meaning. “It was not my identity as a Dominican immigrant that Socrates affirmed, but something more fundamental . . . . Here was a sort of identity that felt true to my deepest self. . . . that held out the possibility of absorbing the disparate parts of who I was into some kind of integrated whole” (p. 112). Universals serve as anchors for particulars, affirming not just this or that aspect of one’s identity but one’s whole self.<sup>6</sup> Montás warns that however intoxicating it might feel to explode universals, the cost to the self is high. Such criticism is self-defeating and cannot deliver the liberation it aims at.

Canon critics have missed the mark, then. The tradition matters “not because it is Western, but because of its contribution to human questions of the highest order” (p. 212). But having defended the concept of a canon, a more practical question arises: Who to include on required reading lists when it comes to teaching actual classes?

As director of Columbia’s Core Curriculum, Montás has firsthand experience with issues of inclusivity and diversity in curricula. Students, he argues, are right to ask questions about which authors are present on Columbia’s reading lists and which are not. Yet there is a danger in treating curricula as a means of affirming narrow and pre-existing identities. Specifically, the “criterion of democratic representation—appropriate for politics—is not appropriate for selecting common curricula; to adopt it as such is to abandon the very idea of education and to turn students into interest groups, each lobbying for their own special curricular accommodations” (p. 111). Such a conception presupposes an inability to identify with the “questions of the highest order” that underlie liberal education.<sup>7</sup>

Although not presented as such, this discussion raises a paradox about democracy and liberal education worth exploring. Montás explicitly argues that a liberal education is a preparation for democratic citizenship (p. 57). At the same time, that education is both grounded on the rather aristocratic judgment that certain books are better than others and requires adherence to something other than “democratic representation.” What are we to make of this? The answer, I would suggest, can be found in the process of moving between the particular and the universal. But since understanding universals requires imposing a sense of order onto the world that may be in tension with democratic claims of equality, the democratic value in liberal education requires a different understanding of democracy than simple “representation.”

This brings to mind Plato’s discussion of regime types in *Republic* 8. There, in a similar paradox, the democratic regime and the democratic

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6. It is fitting that Montás came to this understanding during his encounter with Socrates and Plato, since it precisely captures the theory of the Forms.

7. See p. 212.

man's soul are suspended in a sort of limbo, characterized by a formless freedom that Socrates likens to a many-colored coat.<sup>8</sup> The democratic soul may descend into tyranny—or, perhaps, it could be guided by a vision of aristocracy to pursue wisdom and knowledge of universals. (Let us note that the only regime where philosophy is mentioned in Book 8 is democracy.) The educator's job is to guide students in this process of cultivating a yearning for wisdom within a democratic soul.<sup>9</sup> In this way, students can come to understand universals and see how their nature embraces a range of particulars. And this, I would argue, is a more satisfactory—and even democratic—account of education than the “representation” model, which can recognize nothing except power because it has rejected universals. This sort of education is therefore a better theoretical resource for grounding one's sense of self and an essential component of self-sovereignty.

Let me end with this final observation: as the previous paragraph demonstrates, the “great books” have an enduring relevance. Montás's guiding principle (drawn from the originator of Columbia's Core, John Erskine) is that “a great book is one that has meaning, and continues to have meaning, for a variety of people over a long period of time.”<sup>10</sup> This principle is broad and flexible while retaining a standard for what makes a text worth reading. It allows for a Gandhi, or a Sun Tzu, or an Achebe to be on a reading list precisely because these authors wrote powerful texts that help us make sense of the human condition. This idea of what belongs in the canon preserves what is best about a great-books education while defending against narrow-mindedness in its implementation. It does not require that a curriculum be set in stone. It invites both students and faculty to offer input on authors that they want to read without compromising the foundations of a liberal education.

*Rescuing Socrates* is a powerful book that has come at exactly the right time. Its guiding spirit is the famous line from the Roman playwright Terence: *homo sum, humani nil a me alienum puto*. “I am a human and I think that nothing human is alien to me.” Montás shows that the idea of a canon need not be exclusive—in fact, to be done right, it must be *inclusive*. But this notion of inclusivity preserves the possibility of universals and questions

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8. THE REPUBLIC OF PLATO bk. VIII, at 235 (Allan Bloom trans., Basic Books 2016 ed.) (1968) (“Just like a many-colored cloak decorated in all hues, this regime, decorated with all dispositions, would also look fairest, and many perhaps,” I said, “like boys and women looking at many-colored things, would judge this to be the fairest regime.”).

9. 1 ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA 7 (Harvey C. Mansfeld & Delba Winthrop ed. & trans., University of Chicago Press 2000) (1835) (“To instruct democracy, if possible to reanimate its beliefs, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of affairs for its inexperience, and knowledge of its true interests for its blind instincts; to adapt its government to time and place; to modify it according to circumstances and men: such is the first duty imposed on those who direct society in our day.”).

10. JOHN ERSKINE, MY LIFE AS A TEACHER 168–69 (1948).

about virtue, truth, and the good life, which have traditionally and rightly guided liberal education. In doing so, Montás defends liberal education from two waves: those who want to deconstruct it and those who want to ossify it. *Rescuing Socrates* deserves to be widely read and demands serious attention by anyone interested in a liberal education's value.