

Why finance professors should be teaching Nietzsche

Salvatore Babones

A dark cloud looms over Australia's elite universities: the dark cloud of civilisation. Once welcomed for protecting the weak, healing the sick, and ennobling the mind, civilisation is now feared as a harbinger of racism and colonial exploitation.

Western civilisation, that is. That's the one to watch out for. All the others are just fine.

At least, that's the view from the Quadrangle at the University of Sydney, where seven humanities and social science departments (plus a slew of individual professors) have issued 'open letters' against the university's cooperation with the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation. Those objecting include the departments of English, history, government, sociology, anthropology, political economy, and media studies.

The Ramsay Centre, funded by a bequest from the late healthcare magnate Paul Ramsay, wants to offer high-achieving students scholarships of up to \$30,000 a year to read the great books of Western civilisation in a small seminar format. They want talented students, of course. But they also want to foster a 'cadre of leaders' who appreciate Western values and Australia's Western heritage.

The Sydney humanities professors, like those at the ANU (which broke off talks with Ramsay in June), treat Western civilisation as an object of curiosity and criticism. They want to 'deconstruct' it, to use one of their favourite words. They certainly don't want to live it, in the Ramsay sense of embracing Western civilisation as the most important inspiration for our society and our selves.

For the rest of the university, Western civilisation isn't what we study; it's what we do. Australian law schools teach students how to practice law in a tradition as old as Cicero. Medical schools teach the Hippocratic Oath binding doctors only to heal, never to harm, and to treat patient records as 'holy secrets'. The scientific method goes back to Aristotle; music theory to Plato.

You can't teach architecture without the Greeks and Romans, and a historically-minded veterinarian might start with Cato or Xenophon. That's Xenophon the 4th century BC student of Socrates. He had citizenship trouble, too, and was exiled from his native Athens. Politics was an even tougher sport in ancient Greece than in today's Australia.

Modern finance and accounting got their start in Renaissance Italy. Economics? Whether you're a fan of Adam Smith or Karl Marx, you'll find your inspiration in Great Britain. The mother of modern nursing? England's Florence Nightingale. The father of modern dentistry? France's Pierre Fauchard.

The point is not that other civilisations have been sitting on their hands for the last 3000 years. It's that most academics working in Western-style universities pretty much do Western civilisation all the time. If you want to immerse yourself in Chinese or Islamic civilisation, go to a temple school or madrasa. If you want to immerse yourself in Western civilisation, get a good university degree.

Great books programs like the one proposed by the Ramsay Centre should be university-wide degrees, open to all students -- and all teachers. The humanities don't 'own' our collective civilisation. Teachers from other departments can spark students' imaginations in ways that are much more exciting.

The first book in Western civilisation is Homer's *Iliad*, which tells how the stubborn pride of the warrior Achilles led to the death of his best friend. If you really want to get a group of sensitive teenagers exploring how we deal with feelings of rage and guilt, hire a psychologist to teach it. You don't need a specialist in Greek literature to help students understand these universal human emotions.

Why not read Plato's *Laws* with an actual lawyer? Aristophanes' comedy classic *The Clouds* is full of fart jokes; cue a gastroenterologist. *Hamlet* calls out for a social worker, *Macbeth* for a chemist. Let an engineer really 'deconstruct' the clever inventions of *Robinson Crusoe*.

Any moral (or amoral) person can grapple with Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, a book that is probably better read with a finance professor than with a professional philosopher. But then, any great book can be read with anyone. That's what makes them great.

The classics of Western civilisation are too precious to be left solely in the hands of humanities professors. Even if they wanted to offer a Ramsay Centre degree, it would be wrong to give it to them. It's madness to force it on them. Many other professors actually like our civilisation. Give us the chance to teach it.