

APSA Panel Presentation, August 29, 2019<sup>1</sup>

## THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF EVA BRANN TO AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

The topic of this paper has little to do with the title of the panel and more to do with the earlier panel on education; this paper is a continuation of those themes with the additions of politics and philosophy. I thank the Claremont Institute for giving me this opportunity, my fellow panelists who have written thoughtful papers, the discussants, and of course Annalyssa who keeps the trains running on time. My paper is divided into several parts: an introduction to Eva Brann and St. John's College where she teaches; liberal education and civic education; understanding America through written and spoken words, which has as a focus the three documents and statesman that are the primary focus of Brann's study in American Political Thought – Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, James Madison and his "Memorial and Remonstrance," and Abraham Lincoln and The Gettysburg Address – and by way of conclusion I list her contributions with respect to specific participants: teachers and students of American Political Thought, those in the discipline of political science, American citizens, and beings with imaginations.

Let me begin with a question: Who is Eva Brann? She is a tutor at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. She came to America with her family at the age of twelve, fleeing Nazi Germany. She lived in New York and studied History at Brooklyn College and has a Ph.D. from Yale in Classics and Classical Archaeology. In a question and answer session after a talk, a

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1. These remarks introduce the paper "The Contributions of Eva Brann to American Political Thought" to those attending the panel "The Foundation of Rights in Classical and Contemporary Liberalism," sponsored by the Claremont Institute at the 2019 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D. C., August 29, 2019.

student asked what she gained from her experience as an archaeologist.<sup>2</sup> She replied that an archaeologist learns to look at things: you line up the pottery that has been dug up, you notice the color of the clay and the brush strokes. The habit of noticing and seeing, not just looking, but really seeing belongs to the archaeologist, but it also means that questions about perceptions and the senses do not exist; that kind of inquiry, Brann explained, is called philosophy. She learned from this experience that some people have a natural bent that is anti-philosophical. She left her first “career” as an archaeologist when Seth Benardete, noted Professor of Classics, recommended that she consider teaching at St. John’s. What she found lacking among her fellow anthropologists she found in her colleagues and students at Annapolis.

More than sixty years later, Brann is still a tutor at St. John’s College. She is noted for her contributions to the college and liberal arts education in general, to the study of and writing on authors and topics in but not limited to the Great Books curriculum, and has received public recognition for her efforts when she was awarded the National Humanities medal in 2005. Her publications are abundant: her books number more than a dozen and her entries in the St. John’s College Annapolis and Santa Fe library catalogs number more than five hundred. She also translated (from the German) Jacob Klein’s *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra* and with two colleagues has translated Platonic dialogues.

Why devote a paper to her contributions to American Political Thought? For those who are familiar with St. John’s College – and I’ll share more in a moment for those who are not acquainted with their program of study – the College does not have departments, nor does it have professors who dedicate their careers to particular fields of study. The simple answer to my

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2. Eva Brann, “On Compromise” Speech at Ashbrook Center, Ashland University, Ashland, OH (October 27, 2017).

question why write such a paper is that she is perhaps the best example of someone who has written seriously on topics familiar to political scientists and to students of political philosophy and of America and the American founding who is not a political scientist and who comes at these questions from a decidedly different stance. The foundation from which she begins is one firmly planted in liberal education and institutions of learning such as St. John's College, a school explicitly devoted to free inquiry, to radical inquiry.

How has Brann's teaching at St. John's influenced her writing? The founding of St. John's College as we know it today dates to 1937 when Scott Buchanan and Stringfellow Barr implemented a Great Books curriculum. The original idea of the founding of the college was to resist the historicism present in the universities, which means the notion that everything is to be explained in terms of the social setting and the history that goes into them. Barr & Buchanan wanted a college that was not devoted to secondary literature and not historicist in the sense of trying to understand all things in terms of their history, but in terms of their nature. Brann argues that "human nature is everywhere one and that human beings . . . have undergone a common shaping and that this shaping has been through a certain high wisdom and perfected art, which their authors and masters, considering that what they had thought or made was true and beautiful not only for a time but for ever, fixed for the future, most accessibly in books."<sup>3</sup>

Brann believes that Jacob Klein, long time St. John's tutor and Dean, re-founded the college from Barr & Buchanan's original notion and implemented much of what is present today.<sup>4</sup> What also continues today, and I highlight this as among the reasons for writing on Eva

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3. Eva Brann, "What are the Beliefs and Teachings of St. John's College?" Paper presented to the Committee on the Liberal Arts, St. John's College, Santa Fe, NM (April 1975), 7.

4. Eva Brann, "Higher Gossip," produced by Awarehouse Productions.  
<https://www.youtube.com>

Brann and bringing more attention to her teaching and writing, are the battles against historicism and other efforts to diminish liberal education that many in the modern-day academy still advance. The traditions at St. John's provide a strong defense against these attacks.

The education at St. John's is more broadly known as liberal education. Liberal means to free oneself "from the shackles of conventional views which pass for the truth of things."<sup>5</sup> Klein describes liberal education as follows:

We take a deep look at things, at people, at words, with eyes blind to the familiar. We reflect. Plato has a word for it: *metastrophé* or *periagogé*, a turnabout, a conversion. We detach ourselves from all that is familiar to us; we change the direction of our inquiry; we do not explore the unknown any more; on the contrary, we convert the known into an unknown. We wonder. And we burst out with that inexorable question: Why is that so? <sup>6</sup>

This captures in a nutshell the St. John's education and how Brann teaches and writes.

The teaching at St. John's is unique, but consistent with Klein's description of going to the root. St. John's has tutors, described as "guardians of learning," and not professors, who present themselves as "authorities of knowledge" or "transmitters of doctrine."<sup>7</sup> Tutors teach all parts of the undergraduate curriculum and students study the entire program.<sup>8</sup> This includes four years of seminar readings, language tutorials (two years of Greek and two years of French), a music tutorial and Chorus, and four years of classes and laboratories in math and science. All

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5. Jacob Klein, *Lectures and Essays* (Annapolis, MD: St. John's College Press, 1985), 261. Jacob Klein (1899-1978) taught at St. John's College from 1939-1978 and was Dean of the College from 1949-1958.

6. Jacob Klein, *Lectures and Essays*, 162.

7. Eva Brann, "Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening," Parents' Weekend Lecture, St. John's College, Annapolis, MD, (November 2011), 2-3.

8. Eva Brann, "One American Curriculum: St. John's College," Danish Ministry of Education and Research, Winter (1992): 3.

books and study materials are drawn from the Great Books of the Western tradition, from the Greeks through the twentieth century. Socrates is the model for what Brann calls this “unteacherly mode of teaching.”<sup>9</sup> The questioning, the “what is it” that begins many of the Platonic dialogues is central to the St. John’s program. Asking a question conveys an acknowledgement that one does not know and has a willingness to ask others. Socrates’ longing for knowledge, his love of wisdom, which is the translation of the Greek word *philosophia*, is also a model of the pursuit in which students and tutors alike engage.<sup>10</sup>

What place does liberal education and this model of free and radical inquiry have in the discipline of Political Science and specifically in the study of American Political Thought? Brann argues that the culture present in America is one that is based on a literary tradition, characterized by Brann as “an enormous written tradition” which is ambivalently labeled as “classics.”<sup>11</sup> There is thus a necessity to cultivate a cultural literacy, which is expressed in terms of “necessary to our living.” The American world has a political community and a culture that is based on writing found in two sources. The most influential work, the Bible, is cherished by some and not recognized by others, Brann explains. The other writings are the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. She calls for the “study of the central writings which are the origin and implicitly still pervade our way of life” from elementary school through college.<sup>12</sup> They should be treated with reverence and appreciation; she recommends that younger students

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9. Eva Brann, “Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening,” 3.

10. Eva Brann, “Talking, Reading, Writing, Listening,” 3-5.

11. Eva Brann, “Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy,” *The Nebraska English Journal* 33, no. 3 (1988): 5.

12. Eva Brann, “Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy,” 6.

learn a certain amount by heart and the older students engage in discussion of the original writings. Brann argues that classics of the Western tradition serve as the body of literature from which to draw the readings for the following reason: “American democracy is its most powerful political consequence—one might even say its culmination.”<sup>13</sup>

To achieve the end of shaping and preserving democracy, she calls for good schooling, literacy in the Western tradition, and a reaffirmation of cultural literacy. This formation of students throughout their schooling lays a foundation for democratic institutions through literacy that is renewed through both habit and intellectual understanding. This formation also has the advantage of reaching a broad base of the citizenry who are part of the American democratic republic.

The complement to the broad strokes of engaging the citizenry in shaping American democracy is found in Brann’s essay entitled “Civic Education.” Brann proposes a civic education that achieves respect, rationality, and reverence. The distinction between the public realm and private world that exists requires behavior—virtues—that contribute to navigating successfully the two stances that Americans assume. Respect for the opinions of others, regardless of their worthiness, calls upon us to understand them. Rationality consists of four components—inventiveness, objectivity, compromise, and principle—each of which reflects a different stance linked to reason. Reverence is the last of the three and perhaps the most profound. Reverence holds the republic together and stems from “a certain awe that the institutions of this country work . . . [and have been] adopted by a rational process of choice.”

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13. Eva Brann, “Literacy, Culture, and the Shaping of Democracy,” 7.

These behaviors of respect, rationality, and reverence can be exercised in a conversation around a seminar table as well as in the public and private settings in a democratic republic. They make civil debate possible and they contribute to the formation of a citizenry that can successfully engage in self-governance. The education necessary to achieve these behaviors, Brann argues, is a book education, usually acquired at an institution of learning (though she points out the exception of Abraham Lincoln who was largely self-taught through his reading).

In her essay “Concerning the Declaration of Independence” she recommends that “the Declaration should not so much be taught as talked of at every American college.”<sup>14</sup> “Every student and every teacher should join in the discussion as if their lives depended on it – as they do.”<sup>15</sup> These exercises of study and practical experience instill the respect and reverence of which she spoke. Brann identifies liberal education as the means to achieve civic education. “Liberal education is, from its ancient beginnings, that wide base which underlies the specific civic education of republics.”<sup>16</sup> Liberal education can inspire and instill virtues that contribute to the American democratic republic and provide the means to foster and perpetuate the institutions that date from the founding.

The contributions of Eva Brann to American Political Thought take many forms. I offer multiple examples at the end of my paper. I’ll share a few by way of conclusion. Rather than developing new theories, her contributions take the form of probing and recapturing original understandings and conceptions; she takes seriously the thoughts and ideas of those who have

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14. Eva Brann, “Concerning the Declaration of Independence,” *The College* XXVIII, no. 2 (1976):1.

15. Eva Brann, “Civic Education,” 18.

16. Eva Brann, “Civic Education,” 18.

made substantial contributions to America through the vehicle of liberal education and sees this type of education as a means to perpetuate American foundations. We live in a time when attempts to erase, dismiss, or recast American history are like a runaway stagecoach. It is similar to the battle to diminish liberal education. Brann has dedicated much effort to the study of the writings of those who have lived before us, thinking about them, and understanding them. In her essay on the Declaration of Independence she refers to it as a *logos*, “a work of justification and explanation, an account-giving.”<sup>17</sup> With that as a starting point in American Political Thought, the student recognizes the depth of the foundation of America and the risk of dismissing or ignoring it. She aims to make what she studies relevant to the present, but within certain limitations. She began her talk “On Compromise” with a statement on politics: “I am not a great believer in philosophizing, by which I mean trying to get to the bottom of things concerning current affairs. That’s because I think there has to be some calming distance and some extended thinking for unsettling events to reveal their stable shape.”<sup>18</sup> That stable shape is found in many of the authors and writings that I have referenced in this paper. More importantly that stable shape can serve as an anchor to grasp when discussing political topics.

My effort has been to bring to the forefront a few of the ideas and arguments in her writings that relate to these topics. While I don’t see modern universities transforming themselves into Great Books Colleges, for those on the front lines battling the assault on liberal education, such a defense begins with understanding liberal education and the purpose that it serves in a democratic republic, and then reading widely and using the tradition of philosophy and political philosophy as well as math and science to bolster our arguments. This also

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17. Eva Brann, “Concerning the Declaration of Independence,” 3.

18. Eva Brann, “On Compromise,” Speech at Ashbrook Center.



contributes to breaking down the department barriers that exist in the modern University that can stifle conversation. Brann offers recommendations to those who teach at modern universities:

... the phrase *to make an original contribution* will lose its point, *research* will be replaced by search, *productivity* will go unrewarded—although there should be an obligation to the continual intramural, written articulation of thought, not as a contribution to the abstract world of learning, but as a benefit to the concrete present company.<sup>19</sup>

Imagine if those proposals took hold at any of the universities where you teach. Teaching would take on a drastically different character as would studies in political science. The crisis that we face today in the lack of civic education among the citizenry began when we lost our way with respect to the place and value of liberal arts education that serves as a foundation for liberty and a self-governing people.

I close with a reference back to where I began when Brann spoke of the anti-philosophical stance of the archaeologists who look and see things, but never ask questions. The radical form of questioning that she teaches and applies to her own studies and writing takes students and teachers alike back to the foundation of whatever they are studying. In American Political Thought and in Political Science generally, it takes us back to original documents such as the Declaration of Independence, it takes us back to those whose writings that transport us to significant events such as Lincoln's speech at Gettysburg, it takes us back to Madison who fought against a bill establishing a provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion in his home state of Virginia. Simultaneous with the questioning is a learning about the foundations of America. That is the direction toward which we must tend, and the writings of Eva Brann are a good starting point.

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19. Eva Brann, *Paradoxes of Education in a Republic*, 145.

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