

Three Cheers for the Ramsay Centre

Martin Davies

The country's leading national university, the ANU, has decided to break off consultation with the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation over a generous bequest to fund a course in Western civilisation.

It is not every day that a university decides to [turn down a \\$3bn bequest](#) to fund a Humanities program. In these straitened times this seems a very regrettable decision indeed.

As a side note: there is usually never enough funding for the Humanities, and many outside the tertiary sector seriously question the value of what little funding there is. Instead, the Humanities are criticised for their capacity to soak-up meagre funding which could be used to greater benefit in medicine, engineering and other practical areas. My own discipline, philosophy, comes in for [particular hostility in this regard](#). Put simply, research on the philosophy of Hegel does not matter as much as important work on prostate cancer. There is *some* truth in this, but I find these attacks on the Humanities to be unsubtle in the extreme. [They are ignorant of the many surprising contributions the Humanities have made and continue to make](#). The debate between what is considered 'wasteful' and 'not wasteful' in terms of funding priorities is a debate that is [stale, old and tired](#).

The ANU/Ramsay dispute is, in effect, a reversal of this bleak situation; it is a case of a university *turning its back* on Humanities funding.

WTF?

Accepting for the purposes of the argument that Humanities should receive *some* funding what is at the heart of the decision of a major university to turn down the magnanimous proposal offered by the Ramsay Centre?

Academic autonomy

The issue of academic autonomy has been raised as a reason, but this is, at best, ostensible. [Former PM Tony Abbott](#), and [Simon Haines](#), the Director of the Ramsay Centre, have both claimed that the terms of the contract made [no demands on the ANU in terms of appointments nor autonomy](#). I have no

privileged access to the terms of the contract, which I assume is commercial in confidence, but this can't be the real reason. If this was, it would be merely a matter of finessing the contract to the satisfaction of both parties, since [neither of them appear to disagree with the proposition that a university should be able to run its own affairs.](#)

I suspect the “autonomy” issue is a red herring.

The real reason for the decision seems to hinge on the notion of “western civilisation”. The place and purpose of *this* in a university like the ANU is what is really at issue. The ANU claims [to already offer courses in elements of western culture](#), more than 150 in fact, albeit they do not come under the rubric “western civilisation”. Might this not be enough?

Clearly, not in the view of the Ramsay Centre and its supporters. If it were, they would not be making another offer. There is doubt that many of these courses [resemble anything like the “great books” courses offered in the US](#). It is also suggested that the current ANU offerings are, in any case, [‘framed through the perspectives of class, race, gender and associated theories’](#) and thereby infused with left-wing ideology. (The ANU may dispute it, but there is certainly evidence that Left-wing agendas have more [or less taken over the Humanities in university departments](#). Late as it may be, there are moves against this hegemony: witness the rise of the [Heterodox Academy](#)).

A class-focussed, left of centre approach, is not quite, it appears, what the Ramsay Centre had in mind.

Western Civilisation?

Regrettably, a debate about the merits or otherwise of western civilisation appears to be in danger of being lost by the ANU/Ramsay fall-out. “Lost” in two senses: 1) lost to further scrutiny, discussion and refinement; and 2) lost in terms of a potential source of much-needed funding in an environment of funding scarcity for the Arts.

Ghandi may have been a tad mean-spirited when he responded to a question about western civilisation with [“I think it would be a good idea”](#), but a place to start in such discussions is surely not to snuff out debate (and funding) about courses in western civilisation—however one defines it—but to encourage both and see where they lead. That’s the real spirit of western intellectual inquiry.

In any case, it seems to me that the Ramsay Centre has not pitched its proposal at all well. I suggest that it's not "civilisation" so much as western "thinking" that it wishes to promulgate. And, as I shall argue, that's a very different thing.

By asking to fund a program in "western civilisation", the Ramsay Centre seems to be presupposing, a narrative of history that contemporary historians find objectionable. Moreover, they seem to be explicitly fostering it.

This was clear in the off-hand comment by Mr Abbott in *Quadrant* which [seemed to derail discussions](#). He claimed that the Ramsay Centre was not just encouraging a course on western civilisation, but *promoting* it. According to Mr Abbott: "The key to understanding the Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation is that it's not merely *about* Western civilisation but *in favour* of it."

This sticks in the craw of modern professional historians who, in fairness—whether we agree with them or not—would have a broader understanding contemporary historical trends and theories than Mr Abbott. The reason for their disaffection is that the former PM's view seems to presume a narrative of history that defends an uncritical view of western-centrism.

There is something to this objection. As Bob Carr has noted, an emphasis on "Great Books" of western civilisation rightly or wrongly tends to be conflated by the Left as an emphasis on a "[Dead White Males](#)" [view of history](#). It is seen as [European centrism writ large](#). This is regrettable. Fair or not, call this account of history "Western Civilisation 1" (WC1).

Western Civilisation 1

Contemporary historians seem to [despise this view of history](#). To them, this is a hard sell. It reeks of colonial imperialism for one thing, they say, and is inaccurate. And colonialism—even discussion of it— [is certainly not flavour of the month](#). Anything that remotely smells of WC1 is toxic. This seems to be the nub of the dispute between the ANU and the Ramsay Centre.

For sure, real history is not as simple as a single narrative of White Men Rule: civilisations ebb and flow and takes many forms, and directions. Not all of them are pretty. As [Greg Craven](#) has noted 'Western civilisation that brought us Mozart and Mahler also brought us the Holocaust and Hiroshima'. Western civilisation has also [availed itself of many non-western influences](#) from China, the Middle East, and elsewhere. In a sense "western" civilisation is a civilisation that belongs to everyone.

One can admire western civilisation for all that it offers without committing to “promote” it as it were *a priori*. Moreover, if something is a good thing it doesn’t need promoting; it should sell itself. And finally, a suitably western approach to western civilisation and their Great Books would not abandon self-criticism. As Carr puts it: ‘It’s about interrogating the works, not exalting them’. Elsewhere he asks: ‘Would half the objections to the Ramsay proposition vanish if we settled on the verb “interrogate”; that is, that we seek critical readings? Yes, I suspect they would. But, by the time this was said it was too late and the ANU/Ramsay negotiations were over.

I am sure Mr Abbott knows all this, but in the fog of claim and counter-claim his comments weren’t interpreted that way. This seems to have gotten the ANU offside.

There are, in truth, plenty of examples where history might well have been cast very differently if the authors of history were part of the marginalised, the colonised, and the oppressed. Western civilisation is not a *necessary* good in other words, though it may well be a *contingent* good.

Western civilisation is not so much a coherent single offering either as a smorgasbord or *à la carte*: it’s conceivable to take what one likes and reject the rest. Compare China, the “socialist system with western characteristics”, which seems to have done quite well for itself (economically anyway, [recent concerns notwithstanding](#)) despite not having some of the staples of western civilisation, notably human rights, freedom of the press, and an independent judiciary. Western civilisation need not be adopted *en bloc*. There is no plausible reason to think that western civilisation is necessarily and unarguably a basis on which construct a singular historical narrative, even if one is very partial to it.

The WC1 way of framing the notion of “western civilisation” just raises the hackles of those who object to the “black armband” view of history and plays into the quagmire of the [‘history wars’](#).

Best avoided.

Western Civilisation 2

Some suggest, because of this, that the notion of “western civilisation” is [past its use-by date](#). This would be to take the argument too far. [According to some](#), history should ask ‘... why things are historically significant to certain people at

certain times. They need to understand the past from their position in the world, as well as different perspectives in relation to their own cultural identities'. But this is an essentially *relativist* account of historical thinking assumes—in some timeless and uncritical fashion—that each culture and civilisation is *as good as any other*. And, like the defenders of the Ramsay proposal, I think this is far from clear.

Certainly, there is much to admire and celebrate in what is good about western civilisation, and plenty of reasons to prefer it other perniciously misogynistic, autocratic or culturally backward systems (I am thinking of ISIS and North Korea here, but also many Islamic cultures whose cultural practices seem [curiously immune from criticism from the Left](#)). As [Churchill](#) was reported to have said in relation to one crucial feature of western civilisation, democracy (although the attribution is unclear): '[it is] is the worst form of government, except other forms that have been tried from time to time'. In consideration of the various alternatives around, there seems little to disagree with here.

There is little doubt too that western culture has offered great advances in innovation too, from the miraculous (space travel and modern telecommunications) to the necessary (modern medicine and healthcare). [As Mr Abbott notes](#): 'To the question: "What has Western civilisation ever done for us?" [Ramsay] would have ventured: not so much, perhaps, save for the rule of law, representative democracy, freedom of speech, of conscience and religion, liberal pluralism, the prosperity born of market capitalism, the capability born of scientific rigour, and the cultivation born of endless intellectual and artistic curiosity'.

To that list we can add, (western) analytic philosophy, a goodly proportion of it, emanating from—surprise, surprise—[Australia](#).

That's some legacy.

In other words, a rejection of WC1 as a historical narrative does not mean a historical free for all: that every system merits equal attention from one's own "perspectives" and "cultural identities". This is as absurd as insisting on teaching astrology alongside physics (paraphrasing Christopher Hitchens: "I've finished my Chemistry period, now I am off to my Alchemy class".) In a certain sense, western civilisation and culture offers a clear and unambiguous

advance over despotic and backward-leaning regimes. Were it not so, it would not be so popular, nor widespread. Credit where credit is due.

‘Western Civilisation 2’ (WC2) by contrast to WC1, is a *contingent* thesis: western civilisation is not in any principled sense, better nor worse than other civilisation (it could well have been otherwise in some other possible world) though it does appear to have palpable advantages over others, which other civilisations end-up coveting—as they very often do. Reports of the [decline of democracy are greatly exaggerated](#).

This neatly side steps the ‘Great White Men’ narrative that others find objectionable, and goes some way to defusing the history wars.

WC2 is the weaker thesis that it *just turns out* that history took the course it did and that western civilisation triumphed where it did, and failed where it didn’t, and spread where it spread. [A recent book charts its astonishing rise](#). It presupposes no hint of Great White Men and their Great Books, just good men (and women) and good books. An impartial analysis of WC2 would also point out the less than favourable aspects of it too, e.g., great wealth inequality, its fragmentary history of oppressing the poor, and so on with plenty of room for discussion and debate over the details. Nothing is perfect.

Bring it on. A Ramsay-style course devoted to western civilisation can consistently be critical of WC1 as well as full of admiration of WC2. (It is, I suggest, important to get the emphasis right, but whatever one shouldn’t stop the generous hand that might wish to feed the debate.)

This idea of funding a course on WC2, and the books thereof does not seem to me to be objectionable on any grounds; indeed, it seems to be sorely needed—especially given the fact that [many millennials seems ignorant of the culture that gives rise to and safely harbours them](#). Perhaps it is time to educate them about themselves.

Moreover, it does seem historically objectionable either: a narrative about WC2 would be one that tells a dispassionate and unbiased story about what occurred without all the ‘Great White Men’ overtones of WC1.

Reasoning

Simmering beneath all this is, I think, the real aim of the Ramsay Centres’ largesse. What the Ramsay Centre really seeks to do is to fund a program in western *thinking*. And this does seem to me to be unambiguously worth

defending. This really does need further support, widespread endorsement, and cultivation.

It also needs more funding.

Western *thinking*, as opposed to western civilisation, is indeed something to celebrate. While of course the two often go together—albeit not necessarily so (things might have been otherwise)—a distinction needs to be made between ‘western thinking’, which is culturally independent (no-one, and no culture, has a monopoly over thinking) and ‘western civilisation’ that carries the baggage of hostilities over the [‘history wars’](#).

While emanating from and originating largely from a history of western traditions, there is nothing intrinsically “western” about it. Indeed, plenty of non-Anglo thinkers have contributed to it. The great Indian mathematician, [Srinivasa Ramanujan](#), comes to mind, and there are plenty of others, for example, the Arabs in Mesopotamia, [who invented the useful concept of “zero”](#).

While culturally neutral, western thinking, as it has been called, (unsurprisingly) does have a history largely deriving from the West. From the Pre-Socratics like [Democritus](#) who invented the atomic theory of the universe, to the earliest musings of [Socrates, Plato and Aristotle](#) (the former two devised a ‘method’ for thinking philosophically; the latter arguably invented logic as a discipline and provided a taxonomy of the natural sciences that largely remains today).

Thence, of course, to the [enlightenment thinkers](#) of Bacon, Descartes, Locke, Voltaire, Rousseau, Mill, Hume, Kant, and others in the ‘modern’ period who championed tolerance, ant-religiosity, rational thinking, the scientific method and, in some cases, reductionism. There might be disputes in the margins, but this has, it must be said, led to a greatly enlightened world.

Onwards, of course, to the rise of [analytic philosophy](#) and the brilliant work in formal logic by thinkers such as Rudolf Carnap, Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Alan Turing. The latter usually regarded as the “father” of computer science (in that he invented the concept and effectively started a modern-day industry) but he also attended Wittgenstein’s class and published his famous paper on ‘Computing Machinery and Intelligence’ in the [philosophy journal, *Mind*](#). Turing could be said to belong in both camps in that his work was a philosophical advance as much as a technological one. I

mention other examples of philosophical advances that have changed our world in various ways [here](#).

To be sure, there is evidence of western-style thinking in many literary works too, in addition to treatises in philosophy. Bob Carr [mentions Dante, Homer, Shakespeare and the Greek Tragedies](#) as providing an instructive basis for philosophical discussion and debate on a variety of topics, and to this we can add Jane Austen in illuminating and providing a perceptive account of human relationships, and many others besides. (My favourite poet is Australian, Kenneth Slessor. His poem *Five Bells* is a philosophical meditation about time perception, life and death, and other human experiences.)

Whither 'western' thinking?

Could this *thinking* have emanated in places other than the western hemisphere, for example in the Middle East or Asia? Could the enlightenment have started in China, Thailand or Japan? Could the renaissance have commenced in India? Could the traditions of innovative western thinking have arisen elsewhere in the world?

These are interesting questions. In principle, of course, they could have; in practice, it appears they did not (leaving aside important examples such as those mentioned earlier).

Why not? These are interesting empirical questions. [One academic](#) has written an entire book on this phenomenon. Another, the psychologist Richard Nisbett, has looked at [subtle differences in intercultural thinking](#) patterns and concluded that there are indeed differences between the thinking of those in the 'West' and 'East', that have resulted in the enormously disproportionate contributions of "western" thinkers to the history of intellectual thought. The experimental data is summarised [here](#).

Without a program of study that focusses on the unique legacy of western thinking, and a program that offers a dedicated opportunity to teach and critique such things in an unbiased and coordinated way, we will remain forever in the dark. The Ramsay Centre bequest offers the promise of commencing just such a discussion—by means of a course in western thinking; thinking that came to us—not only, nor exclusively, but predominantly—from what we call "western civilisation", an intellectual culture we all contribute to, and enjoy and benefit from daily. See Stephen Pinker's book [Enlightenment Now](#). (Thanks to it, we live in a time where we have the lowest mortality rate,

highest life expectancy, lowest amount of murders per community, greatest amount of social services offered, most educated, and the safest time in all world history.) We should perhaps learn to appreciate it more

Conclusion

It is possible, I think, to chart a course through the Scylla and Charybdis of the ANU/Ramsay dispute. It is possible to buy-into the idea that there is a narrative of Western civilisation worth celebrating, and there is certainly good reasons to celebrate western reasoning. Indeed, there probably is no other game in town.

Scylla and Charybdis, is of course a [literary allusion](#) and perhaps, [as Chesterton observed](#), it's probably also a [fallacy of the false alternative](#) (in logic) too—at least in respect of this discussion. These are concepts that are probably well worth teaching—as they would be in a dedicated course on the traditions of western thinking.