

*On the Reasonableness of the Current General Education System at Southern: A Sketch.*

By Ken W. Gatzke, PHI

**I. Background.** One of the feeble arguments against the current General Education System (CGES) at Southern given by supporters of the proposed changes called "the Liberal Education Program" (LEP) is that the current system has no "rationale". This argument conflates two distinct possibilities: (i) the CGES has no rationale and as a consequence, of course, we do not provide one to students, and (ii) the CGES has a rationale but we do not provide it to students. The latter strikes me as true, but supporters of the LEP construe the situation in which we are as the former. Of course, in either case we would fail to provide a rationale, but I will suggest that the supporters of LEP reason fallaciously that since they do not hear (know of) a rationale for CGES, there is none.

One encounters this error in the common remark that the CGES is "broken". When I've heard this I have asked: "How?" Since, as is widely known, there is no good empirical evidence showing the superiority of one or the other types of systems (LEP or CGES), the proponents of brokenness are unable to say. Curiously, this does not lessen their support for LEP.

I plan to present a version (actually a couple) of "rationales" for CGES. Of course, it will not be a defense of our CGES as such, since our CGES is an instance of a wide-spread and long-developed system of general studies which had been the standard at the vast majority of universities for quite some time. One would have thought everyone would know why.

**II. Meaning.** It is fair to say that a dominant intellectual theme in the West in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been "ahistorical". This contrasts with that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which was decidedly "historical". One sees this in every field, from the focus on (a timeless) logic in much of 20<sup>th</sup> century Philosophy, to painters whose work shows no sign that there even was earlier painting, to architects who consciously avoid the ornaments and structures of their predecessors, and playwrights whose plays are contained in a single evening's timeframe. Movies' timeframes from the beginning often have restricted themselves to the momentary, and one might take TV's current *24* as the logical outcome of such a view. Modern novels such as *Something Happened* might be deemed almost instantaneous. Even the slogans of everyday life ["What have you done for me lately?", "The Now Generation"] collapse time into the moment. Psychology's Behaviorism focused on animals, including human ones, in a box stripped of context, and Structuralism, sans content, from linguistics to literary studies, hoped for atemporal systems as substance. Consider the momentary power of Fashion ["What's new?" or "Last Year's Look"]. Even the cellphone's ubiquitous communication *now* might count. One could pile on the examples at will. They might include the LEP.

I am not claiming one cannot find counter-instances or that the long-run tendency is not historical—I suppose George Lucas wanted to be our Wagner, (phony) historical novels remain popular, and some sciences (biology, physics) include essential spatiotemporal dimensions in their studies—but a dominant mode of 20<sup>th</sup> century production has avoided history. Although not as consciously forthright as Wittgenstein's World War I remark ["What is history to me? My world is the first and only one."], that first 20<sup>th</sup> century generation and our current high school students have the same attitude: they are unknowing modernists. "Modernism" is the inability to trust or work in one's traditions (history) and the last century was the century of the Modern. We are supposedly in a "Post-Modern World", but sadly, that movement has provided more a present style made out of the facades of the past than any real substantial response to the difficulties of Modernism.

My reason for reminding you (one hopes) of this is to suggest an argument about the significance

of history which is crucial to understanding the rationale for the CGES.

### III. History.

On September 20, 2008, the standings in the Central Division of the National League for Major League Baseball were as follows:

Central	W	L	Pet.	GB
Chicago	93	60	.608	—
Milwaukee	84	71	.542	10
Houston	81	73	.526	12.5
St. Louis	80	74	.519	13.5
Cincinnati	72	82	.468	21.5
Pittsburgh	65	90	.419	29.0

The question I pose about it is this: What does one need to know in order to understand this array of names and numbers? There are trivial, momentary things ["93" is a larger number than "60"], of course, but in order to understand the whole thing, it is crucial to command a view of many temporal notions, or elements that make almost no sense without their attendant histories. These would include notions such as "league", "season", "games", "baseball", the goals and purposes involved in these, that the left hand column names represent cities, that how those cities are "represented" is complex, that the left hand column also represents teams, that some columns represents winnings, and others losing, that winning is more important (the percent column), that the "games behind" column combined with knowledge of the season shows the Chicago team on this day secured this division's title, that there are divisions [and how they got that way], and so on and on. The more historical understanding one has of these and other items, the deeper and richer one's knowledge and understanding becomes, and so on, and also *vice versa*. The argument I begin here with this simple example is that for human institutions (and much more) one must have historical understanding in order to be said to have much knowledge (or awareness of meaning) at all.

An interesting and brief introduction to the significance of history (among many) is R.G. Collingwood's little book on physical nature, *the Idea of Nature*. He argues there that in the West there have been three substantial views of Nature: the Ancient view (c. 600 BCE—1300 CE), the Renaissance/Enlightenment view (c.1300CE—1800 CE), and the Modern period (c. 1800 CE to the present). The Ancient view, which includes the medieval period, saw Nature as "alive", that is, as containing purpose in its very being, with history seen as cyclical. The Renaissance view removed purpose entirely from Nature, considering Nature as a Mechanism, as a Machine. A machine essentially performs a set of functions in a repetitive, non-developmental manner, since it is a system of integrated parts such that if one knows the design, the forces operating in it and on it and the state it is in, one can predict future states with some precision. This is the period that leads to the science of Newton. History in this period is seen as somewhat repetitive of the past; so, one can learn from it. In Collingwood's view these views of Nature have been rendered obsolete by the success of the Modernist view. It is that view that gives us a means to consider our CGES.

Collingwood argues that if one does not consider the history of some subject, one will have a distorted view of what one studies. The less of a temporal dimension we include in our studies, the less we will understand: this is because the spatiotemporal dimension of reality is part of the

very being of real things. The Ancient and Renaissance views fail to see this, and so does the ahistorical thread in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The modernist perspective on Nature has the following features, according to Collingwood: 1. Change is progressive, not cyclical [new things can be produced in Nature]. This, of course, has nothing to do with evaluation. 2. Nature is not mechanistic [follows from (1), since machines only repeat their functions], 3. An internal teleology is introduced [the Renaissance mechanistic view rejected any purpose in Nature; the modern view sees some types of beings "trying" to maintain their being (development) in opposition to (1)]. There is no overall purpose, and history is, as a consequence, open-ended, and essentially unpredictable. 4. Substance and structure resolve into functions [there are no independently existing things; rather, "substances" are networks of relations]. 5. "Individual things", in order to be of a given type, T, must occupy at least the minimum space and the minimum time for being a T; that is, individuals are partly defined by their spatiotemporal histories.

The suggestion in this view is that meaning, even in the case of physical nature, is to be found in a developmental process (a 'history'), not in a set of features a subject has at a given time. [I suggest to my students that if, when they observe birds, they do not see something of dinosaurs in them, they do not, in a complete sense, understand birds.] By including in this model a parallel view of language one can begin a fruitful analysis of human institutions. [Language, too, is progressive, developmental; purely formal analyses of language are unlikely to succeed; the interests and purposes of the users of language must be included in determinations of meaning; language is to be understood in a functional manner in terms of a use theory of meaning with a referentialist base; and meaningful language presupposes spatiotemporal contexts found in developmental (psychosocial) processes.]

**IV. The Current General Education System at Southern.** The first point to be made is that our (and other parallel) CGESs have histories, and that their meanings are to be found in part in those histories. Southern's accrediting institution [NEASC] and LEP supporters propose that our CGES is a "loose distribution system, requiring simply that students select from a set of more or less unrelated courses". In a parallel manner, creationists propose birds are unrelated to dinosaurs, humans to other primates, and so on. And this makes sense if one looks at the instantiations of one's subject (birds, humans, or our CGES) ahistorically. If one approaches the current situation historically, however, one begins to see all sorts of "natural" relationships.

The second point to be made is that those "unrelated courses" so fondly derided [even to focus on *courses* shows a failure of understanding] exist in the contexts of various disciplines, and those disciplines do not exist by accident—they, too, have histories, and their meanings are partly expressed in those histories. The history of a discipline, of course, shows relationships to other disciplines, at the very least to those out of which the one focused on developed. It is also worth pointing out that the disciplines one has have something to do with the history of the attempt to comprehend the reality one is trying to understand and describe. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century one could imagine that citing a biblical text might have seemed relevant to astronomy, but once Galileo's and his inheritors' practices had displayed the justice of the claim that the Bible was a text to find out "how to go to Heaven, not how the Heavens go", one should see the emergence of a new discipline, one whose book, he famously said, is written in the language of number (more relationships), and not by nomadic tribes in the Middle East..

The third point to be made is that those disciplines have histories in the context of the history of universities and colleges as well as in the larger histories of societies in which these institutions of higher learning developed.

This is not the place to sort out those various and varied histories, or the relationships they show—that would be a task for several large volumes. What has amazed me in the discussions of the CGES (by accrediting agencies as much as by present faculty) is that no one seems to know

these obvious things. Small groups of people apparently have thought that they could sit in a room for a couple of weeks (the result looks like less time than that was spent) and produce something of more value than the last five plus centuries of complex development that leads to the modern university has produced.

**V. The Reasonableness of our Current General Education System.** There appear to be some obvious connections between the elements of our CGES *even without invoking history*. Adding the histories just makes them deeper and richer.

It would seem there are a number of meaningful ways to explain and justify the CGES. I have reminded you of one: historically. Other (initially non-historical) possibilities that occur to me are: (i) in terms of the notion of languages, (ii) in terms of the objects studied, "object" construed very widely, and (iii) in terms of information. Although one might begin these analyses looking in what appears to be a non-temporal manner, a sensible view ultimately will assume a historical perspective.

**A.** Let us begin with the notion of "objects studied". Here, an "object" would not necessarily be a physical object, although it would include them, but rather "object" in the sense of "objective", that is, that toward which one's inquiry is directed. So, to begin, what are all the possible objects? Here is a proposal of types, their basic kinds of features, and the disciplines that explore those types:

#### Categories of Object

##### A) Physical Objects [inanimate]

- a1) physical features {Physics, Chemistry}
- a2) relations among physical objects {Physics, Chemistry, Earth Science}

##### B) Physical Objects [animate]: Living Things {Biology, Botany, Zoology}

- b1) physical features
- b2) physical relations among [non-human, human]

##### C) Relations among B): Human [secondary features]

- c1) individual [psyche] {Psychology}
- c2) collective [social] {Communications}

##### D) Relations among B): Human [tertiary features]

- d1) individual [psyche; institutional] {History (world); History (American)}
- d2) collective [social; institutional] {History, Economics, Geography, Political Science, Sociology, Anthropology, Public Health}

##### E) Relations among B): Human [quaternary features] {Literature, Dance, Theatre, Music, Art, Media Studies}

- e1) individual [psyche; institutional; aesthetic]
- e2) collective [social; institutional; aesthetic]

##### F) Abstract Objects

- f1) not embodied {Mathematics (pure)}
- f2) embodied {Mathematics (applied), Computer Science}

Not many people ordinarily think this way about education; however, it does provide one with a way to go about choosing what to teach in a curriculum. These are the possible kinds of things one can talk about. Not surprisingly, our CGES looks as if this is how we decided what to require (and suggests some things we might require)—when I suggested that through their history disciplines evolved to deal with reality this is what I had in mind. As should be obvious, the kind of object studied demands a specific type of approach and that leads to the existence of a specific discipline,

There are four academic departments at Southern whose situation does not fit the object model as the ones mentioned above do, and other considerations explain their status.

English Composition does not share its requirement. Since Southern conducts its primary business in English, we presuppose competence in it in all courses. No other department could devote all its energies to that task.

Mathematics is unique in its objects, widespread in its uses, unique in its procedures, and presupposed by many other disciplines. With whom could they share their requirement?

Philosophy takes as its objects all the objects of all the other disciplines and explores the relationships among all the other disciplines, often looking for some unifying notion of the universe. Beyond this "Philosophy of X" function, there are extremely general issues regarding topics such as reasoning, knowledge, and ontology that only Philosophy deals with—one of the many things wrong with the LEP is the failure to notice these unique features of various disciplines. This is related to the LEP assumption, contrary to much educational research, that there is no "transfer of learning" problem. No other department does anything like what Philosophy does, and few departments do exactly the same thing as any other even when it is called by the same name (consider "reasoning" in Literature, Physics, Mathematics, Anthropology, and the Arts).

History also stands alone, and the general significance of history pointed out here should provide ample reason for that status.

**B.** One can make an argument to explain our CGES based on language as well. Instead of focusing on each discipline's intended objects, one may look at the languages used for the primary work of each discipline. One may then look at the logical relations among the various languages in various disciplines. For example, the language of physics surely presupposes the language of mathematics (as Galileo suggested four centuries ago). Many other departments would stand in the same relationship to Mathematics, even Philosophy, whose members might be interested in the nature of numbers, proof, and so on. An examination of the various ways languages appear in different disciplines might be part of explaining their historical relationships (consider Philosophy and Psychology) and so their evolution as disciplines (we also find here explanations for why we do not study some so-called "disciplines"). There are clichés here: The language of Sociology presupposes that of Psychology, and that presupposes the language of Biology, Biology presupposes that of Chemistry, and Chemistry that of Physics, and all those presuppose the language of Mathematics in varied ways.

**C.** Finally, one might well provide an information-based theory of why the particular disciplines exist, why they are important, and why they relate to each other as they do. It is fair to say that each of the different ways suggested for explaining the nature of our CGES (via objects, languages, or information) in a historically sensitive manner will provide pretty much the same array of requirements for a serious, comprehensive understanding of the universe [cf. T. Sebeok, ed., *A Perfusion of Signs*, the work of L. Floridi]. As I said above, the structures of the disciplines and their relationships in the so-called "traditional" general education system is no accident, and so is no "loose distribution".

As the forgoing suggests, the defenders of the LEP, when they consider our CGES, commit a gigantic ignorance fallacy. It is true we do not explain these obvious facts about our CGES to our students. In Philosophy we are often interested in these questions, and so it is often painfully obvious to us how little of this is discussed, and as a consequence how little of the foundation for being an "educated person" we, as educators, provide for our students (this, incidentally, is another unique function of Philosophy). This failure to communicate these obvious facts to our students is a fault of our teaching, however, not of the CGES.

3/24/09