

ADVANCED READING

PASSAGE 1

The myth persists that in 1492 the Western Hemisphere was an untamed wilderness and that it was European settlers who harnessed and transformed its ecosystems. But scholarship shows that forests, in particular, had been altered to varying degrees well before the arrival of Europeans. Native populations had converted much of the forests to successfully cultivated stands, especially by means of burning. Nevertheless, some researchers have maintained that the extent, frequency, and impact of such burning was minimal. One geographer claims that climatic change could have accounted for some of the changes in forest composition; another argues that burning by native populations was done only sporadically, to augment the effects of natural fires. However, a large body of evidence for the routine practice of burning exists in the geographical record. One group of researchers found, for example, that sedimentary charcoal accumulations in what is now the northeastern United States are greatest where known native American settlements were greatest. Other evidence shows that, while the characteristics and impact of fires set by native populations varied regionally according to population size, extent of resource management techniques, and environment, all such fires had markedly different effects on vegetation pattern than did natural fires. Controlled burning created grassy openings such as meadows and glades. Burning also promoted a mosaic quality to North and South American ecosystems, creating forests in many different stages of ecological development. Much of the mature forestland was characterized by open herbaceous undergrowth, another result of the clearing brought about by burning. In North America, controlled burning created conditions favorable to berries and other fire-tolerant and sun-loving foods. Burning also converted mixed stands of trees to homogeneous forest, for example the longleaf, slash pine, and scrub oak forests of the southeastern U.S. Natural fires do account for some of this vegetation, but regular burning clearly extended and maintained it. Burning also influenced forest composition in the tropics, where natural fires are rare. An example is the pine-dominant forests of Nicaragua, where warm temperatures and heavy rainfall naturally favor mixed tropical or rain forests. While there are primarily grown in cooler, drier, higher elevations, regions where such vegetation is in large part natural and even prehuman. Today, the Nicaraguan pines occur where there has been clearing followed by regular burning, and the same is likely to have occurred in the past: such forests were present when Europeans arrived and were found only in areas where native settlements were substantial; when these settlements were abandoned, the land returned to mixed hardwoods. This succession is also evident elsewhere in similar low tropical elevations in the Caribbean and Mexico.

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Intellectual authority is defined as the authority of arguments that prevail by virtue of good reasoning and do not depend on coercion or convention. A contrasting notion, institutional authority, refers to the power of social institutions to enforce acceptance of arguments that may or may not possess intellectual authority. The authority wielded by legal systems is especially interesting because such systems are institutions that nonetheless aspire to a purely intellectual authority. One judge goes so far as to claim that courts are merely passive vehicles for applying the intellectual authority of the law and possess no coercive powers of their own. In contrast, some critics maintain that whatever authority judicial pronouncements have is exclusively institutional. Some of these critics go further, claiming that intellectual authority does not really exist—i.e., it reduces to institutional authority. But it can be countered that these claims break down when a sufficiently broad historical perspective is taken: Not all arguments accepted by institutions withstand the test of time, and some well-reasoned arguments never receive institutional imprimatur. The reasonable argument that goes unrecognized in its own time because it challenges institutional beliefs is common in intellectual history; intellectual authority and institutional consensus are not the same thing. But the critics might respond, intellectual authority is only recognized as such because of institutional consensus. For example, if a musicologist were to claim that an alleged musical genius who, after several decades, had not gained respect and recognition for his or her compositions is probably not a genius, the critics might say that basing a judgment on a unit of time—“several decades”—is an institutional rather than an intellectual construct. What, the critics might ask, makes a particular number of decades reasonable evidence by which to judge genius? The answer, of course, is nothing, except for the fact that such institutional procedures have proved useful to musicologists in making such distinctions in the past. The analogous legal concept is the doctrine of precedent, i.e., a judge’s merely deciding a case a certain way becoming a basis for deciding later cases the same way—a pure example of institutional authority. But eh critics miss the crucial distinction that when a judicial decision is badly reasoned, or simply no longer applies in the face of evolving social standards or practices, the notion of intellectual authority is introduced: judges reconsider, revise, or in some cases throw out in the reconsideration of decisions, leading one to draw the conclusion that legal systems contain a significant degree of intellectual authority even if the thrust of their power is predominantly institutional.

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In explaining the foundations of the discipline known as historical sociology—the examination of history using the methods of sociology—historical sociologist Philip Abrams argues that, while people are made by society as much as society is made by people, sociologists' approach to the subject is usually to focus on only one of these forms of influence to the exclusion of the other. Abrams insists on the necessity for sociologists to move beyond these one-sided approaches to understand society as an entity constructed by individuals who are at the same time constructed by their society. Abrams refers to this continuous process as "structuring". Abrams also sees history as the result of structuring. People, both individually and as members of collectives, make history. But our making of history is itself formed and informed not only by the historical conditions we inherit from the past, but also by the prior formation of our own identities and capacities, which are shaped by what Abrams calls "contingencies"—social phenomena over which we have varying degrees of control. Contingencies include such things as the social conditions under which we come of age, the condition of our household's economy, the ideologies available to help us make sense of our situation, and accidental circumstances. The ways in which contingencies affect our individual or group identities create a structure of forces within which we are able to act, and that partially determines the sorts of actions we are able to perform. In Abrams analysis, historical structuring, like social structuring, is manifold and unremitting. To understand it, historical sociologists must extract from it certain significant episodes, or events, that their methodology can then analyze and interpret. According to Abrams, these events are points at which action and contingency meet, points that represent a cross section of the specific social and individual forces in play at a given time. At such moments, individuals stand forth as agents of history not simply because they possess a unique ability to act, but also because in them we see the force of the specific social conditions that allowed their actions to come forth. Individuals can "make their mark" on history, yet in individuals one also finds the convergence of wider social forces. In order to capture the various facets of this mutual interaction, Abrams recommends a fourfold structure to which he believes the investigations of historical sociologists should conform: first, description of the event itself; second, discussion of the social context that helped bring the event about and gave it significance; third, summary of the life history of the individual agent in the event; and fourth, analysis of the consequences of the event both for history and for the individual.

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One of the greatest challenges facing medical students today, apart from absorbing volumes of technical information and learning habits of scientific thought, is that of remaining empathetic to the needs of patients in the face of all this rigorous training. Requiring students to immerse themselves completely in medical coursework risks disconnecting them from the personal and ethical aspects of doctoring, and such strictly scientific thinking is insufficient for grappling with modern ethical dilemmas. For these reasons, aspiring physicians need to develop new ways of thinking about and interacting with patients. Training in ethics that takes narrative literature as its primary subject is one method of accomplishing this. Although training in ethics is currently provided by medical schools, this training relies heavily on an abstract, philosophical view of ethics. Although the conceptual clarity provided by a traditional ethics course can be valuable, theorizing about ethics contributes little to the understanding of everyday human experience or to preparing medical students for the multifarious ethical dilemmas they will face as physicians. A true foundation in ethics must be predicated on an understanding of human behavior that reflects a wide array of relationships and readily adapts to various perspectives, for this is what is required to develop empathy. Ethics courses drawing on narrative literature can better help students prepare for ethical dilemmas precisely because such literature attaches its readers so forcefully to the concrete and varied world of human events. The act of reading narrative literature is uniquely suited to the development of what might be called flexible ethical thinking. To grasp the development of character, to tangle with heightening moral crises, and to engage oneself with the story not as one's own but nevertheless as something recognizable and worthy of attention, readers must use their moral imagination. Giving oneself over to the ethical conflicts in a story requires the abandonment of strictly absolute, inviolate sets of moral principles. Reading literature also demands that the reader adopt another person's point of view—that of the narrator or a character in a story—and thus requires the ability to depart from one's personal ethical stance and examine moral issues from new perspectives. It does not follow that readers, including medical professionals, must relinquish all moral principles, as is the case with situational ethics, in which decisions about ethical choices are made on the basis of intuition and are entirely relative to the circumstances in which they arise. Such an extremely relativistic stance would have as little benefit for the patient or physician as would a dogmatically absolutist one. Fortunately, the incorporation of narrative literature into the study of ethics, while serving as a corrective to the latter stance, need not lead to the former. But it can give us something that is lacking in the traditional philosophical study of ethics—namely, a deeper understanding of human nature that can serve as a foundation for ethical reasoning and allow greater flexibility in the application of moral principles.