

GUEST FOREWORD

The Reopening of the American Mind: On Skepticism and Constitutionalism with its allusion to Allan Bloom suggests that James W. Vice wishes to do for the American Mind what Bloom wanted to do for the Student Mind. But especially for certain American minds: those influential and politically rigid minds of the day, whether conservative or liberal.

Vice is disturbed by assumed contemporary rigidities of thinking about public life, public institutions, and public policy, since he values thought itself, not only for itself but as beneficial for, essential to the goodness of, political action and living. But not just any thought. His aim is to blend, or rather to base, political thought on academic thought. But not just pure academic thought since that kind of thought is too centered on its own certainty, even when it is dealing with probability, to sell in a market in which true uncertainty is the principal product but which yet requires a degree of certainty in order to exist, even, or, better still, to succeed. Vice is like a university professional fund-raiser, trying to get the faculty member in want of money for faculty work or prestige to accommodate academic thought to the interests and desires of the donor, on the one hand, and to get the donor to be aware of the donor's own true interest and desires, as determined by academic thought, without corrupting either party.

To this end, Vice develops a theory of "academic skepticism." As an embodiment of that praising term of yesterday, the Renaissance Man or in its more bureaucratic form, the Generalist, Vice's reach for the idea of academic skepticism goes all the way back to Cicero, and through and around him to many of the principal Old Greek and Roman political reasoners. Then he tracks his trail like a jumping hare to the eighteenth century and digs deeply there into Hume, Burke, and Madison. Then with another jump, though the intermediate terrain is again seen flashing by, he ends up with Felix Frankfurter.

Each of these figures is treated fully, though not thickly, in a mix of biographical and intellectual texts, always accompanied by Vice's self text, which, combined with pellucidity of word arrangement and off-beat sudden interpretations, yields a drama a cut above the usual academic soap opera, though given the intellectual commonness of the subject matter itself, he cannot avoid some of its problems.

Academic skepticism as presented by Vice is worthy of center stage in public action and sometimes it even is shoved out there from the wings. For Vice, academic skepticism is a plea on behalf of sober, tolerant political judgment. It is not destructive skepticism, or a skepticism based upon a cynical view of human beings and of the possibilities of knowing anything about them. But it is not a plea for academic dogmatism either. The key issue involved in the concept seems to involve the question of the advocacy of political principle in a context of political probability. Vice is willing to recognize principle and even that it is derivable

from that main academic mode of thought, reason. But he also recognizes that to fit political reality to principle is not only difficult but can be dangerous to freedom. As I read him, however, Vice is not advocating ancient or modern Pragmatism as the best political theory, whose principle is to accept as true anything that works. As already indicated, he believes in the academic. But he believes also in the variability and desirability of community thought, of the aggregation and synthesis of individual thought. So the problem is how to combine effectively the principle and the probable. His catalytic tool is judgment.

In my own governmental experience, his is the right way: reasoned principles, such data as you can get, a sense of the indeterminacy of the ever new context in which the issue presents itself, and then the judgment which takes all these things into account yet which is none of them. That is the only way to do the business of political life, and even it does not work most of the time.

Yet those of us who think well of this balanced, reasoned, probable approach to politics and life might do well to remember:

Judgment and IQ, level of education, etc., are not related.

Melville's concept of the certainty of reality: "Yet the sea is the sea and these drowning men do drown."

If there is no certainty there is no probability: no bag, no balls, no output. Like Cicero himself they may end up being executed by the State.

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“A sermon should have a text, and I have found a suitable one in ...[Bishop Tallyrand]: The only good principle is to have no principles....It is, no doubt, usually enjoyed and dismissed as a witty cynicism; but I propose to treat it quite seriously, as a starting point. Not literally, I admit. It is an epigram; and an epigram has been defined as a half-truth so stated as to be especially annoying to those who believe the other half. I wish to stress both halves, the value of principles as well as their limitations. Accordingly I must reword the text into one of rather the opposite literal import. The right principle is to respect all principles, take them fully into account, and then use good judgment as to how far to follow one or another in the case at hand. All principles are false, because all are true—in a sense and to a degree; hence, none is true in a sense and to a degree which would deny to others a similarly qualified truth. There is always a principle, plausible and even sound within limits, to justify any possible course of action and, of course, the opposite one. The truly right course is a matter of the best compromise or the best or ‘least worse’ combination of good and evil. As in cookery, and in economic theory, it calls for enough and not too much, far enough and not too far, in any direction. Moreover, the ingredients of policy are always imponderable, hence there can be no principle, no formula, for the best compromise.”

Frank H. Knight
Presidential Address
American Economic Association
28 December 1950¹