

SOUL ACTION: THE SEARCH FOR INTEGRITY
IN GENERAL EDUCATION

I call this the “corruption” of consciousness; because consciousness permits itself to be bribed or corrupted in the discharge of its function, being distracted from a formidable task towards an easier one.

—R. G. Collingwood²

For when all combine in every way to make everything easier, there remains only one possible danger, namely, that the ease becomes so great that it becomes altogether too great; then there is only one want left, though it is not yet a felt want, when people will want difficulty.

—Johannes Climacus (Søren Kierkegaard)³

THE FORMIDABLE TASK OF FORMATION

Anyone who doubts the power of language to shape thought has never looked closely at the linguistic specimen known as the truism. The tricky part is catching one, since truisms are masters of disguise. Indeed, a good truism trap is a work of art. It takes artful reframing—I am thinking of works such as Gustave Flaubert’s “Dictionary of Received Ideas” and Jenny Holzer’s installation series *Truisms*—to reveal the unstable and uncanny mix of ideas hidden under each cloak of the commonplace. Truisms are miraculous suspensions of the most disparate and ordinarily reactive cognitive ingredients: truths and half-truths, hopes and fears, facts and fancies, conjectures and contradictions. Somehow the appealing and the objectionable, the obvious and the absurd, the unexplored and the well-trodden all combine to form a bland and soothing bromide.

Found everywhere, truisms are especially concentrated in spheres where recipe-following is preferred to question-posing, where doubt is discouraged and hope cheerfully mandated. Case in point: education. A powerful magnet for kitsch and cliché, few spheres are better than education at

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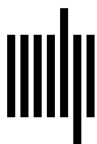
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