



Jon Levenson of Harvard Divinity School was awarded a 2023 Barry Prize for Distinguished intellectual Achievement. In [this video](#), Greg Forster of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters interviews Dr. Levenson about the dangers of “presentism” and “reductionism”—overemphasizing immediate relevance and the role of power relations in a way that can deafen us to the voice of the past and the transcendent.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

I’m Greg Forster. I’m the executive director of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, and I’m in conversation today with Jon Levenson, who is the Albert A. List Professor of Jewish Studies at Harvard Divinity School at Harvard University. Jon was a recipient of a 2023 Barry Prize for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement.

Jon, thank you so much for being with us.

Jon Levenson, Harvard Divinity School

Thank you for inviting me, Greg.

Forster

Tell us about a few of the most important challenges that you see for maintaining high standards in your discipline.

Levenson

That’s a big question. The first thing that comes to mind is politicization, by which I mean the reduction of art, religion, literature, philosophy, such classical humanistic fields to power relations and the expectation that they will have immediate relevance in the world in which we now live. That destroys the precious interval of contemplation and exploration that should be the focus of higher education. There’s a great danger of presentism, of judging the past according to the present, trying to make the past relevant to the present in a cheap, excessively immediate, and politicized way. When that happens, the past in its own voice is muffled, and what we have in fact are politics and power relations and nothing more than that.

This is a widespread assumption or presupposition often unspoken among scholars of matters like religion, art, literature, and it needs to be combated. College, in particular, should be a time to form one’s deepest life commitments or to firm them up and to do so in an informed way, aware of the alternatives to one’s own commitments and respectful of the more serious critiques of them, but committed nonetheless. In other words, it’s a kind of contemplative period of life

and should not be forced into a mode of activism and commitment. Students will have a lifetime to be active, a lifetime to earn a living. They should ideally be given some interval of time to reflect, to explore, to learn new things that don't seem to be immediately relevant.

Forster

I hear two different lines that you're teasing out here, and you can tell me if I'm right about this. One might be called a reductionism of purpose. The purpose of studying the things we study is not merely to accomplish some material end in the short term. We want to study things that are good in themselves, that are worth knowing in themselves, that give us a deeper sense of who we are as human beings without necessarily having immediate application.

I also hear what might be called a reductionism of explanations, an explanatory reductionism, an expectation that nothing happens in the world except political relations. For example, I hear that when you say we can't hear the past as it really was if we bring to it this assumption of everything is politics. Tell me if I'm on the right track there.

Levenson

You're absolutely on the right track. Those two things are points I was making, but also that they're related to each other. The reduction to politics, to identity, to power relations, then occludes the past in its own voice. Of course, we never hear the past perfectly in its own voice, there's no such thing as pure objectivity. But that doesn't mean the quest for objectivity should be abandoned. Yes, both those themes are there, and both of them are related to each other.

Part of the problem here is that the modern university places a very high value on innovation and discovery at the expense of the appropriation of a classical or foundational past. Students and professors now, largely under the influence of the scientific revolution and scientific research, try to find something new when they really haven't mastered and may not even know about what's old. We now have scholars who are specialists who've never been generalists. This is very destructive to the humanities.

Of course, innovation is valuable and people want to learn new material, but the past, the classical past, the foundational past, the once normative past, has been discredited. Only that which applies today, that presentism I mentioned a moment ago, becomes very, very dangerous to the whole academic enterprise.

The last thing that comes immediately to mind is that students today seem to be increasingly fragile. There's a corollary shift, a corresponding shift, from a pedagogical model of the teaching vocation to a kind of mental health model. You've got to be careful that everything you say is inoffensive and that no one is challenged in their psyche. Some challenging in the psyche is essential to the educational process and how to deal with it as a mature adult is very important. When we shift from the pedagogical model to the mental health model, that skill tends to be lost. This is a very serious problem today. Of course, in the more immediate sense, just speaking of my own experience, the upsurge of anti-Semitism on campus and in academia and even in curricular units is very problematic, redolent of some of the worst of modern history. But in the

more theoretical, abstract level, those three or four points I already made strike me as the most important.

Forster

There may be a relationship in that, regarding the mental health model, you seem to be suggesting that an exclusive focus on mental health is actually not necessarily good for mental health because we never develop the skills we need to be healthy people mentally.

Levenson

That's exactly right. It holds back the process of maturation and impedes the development of a resilient personality. Without a certain maturation and resilience, one can't really have much of an intellectual life.

Forster

There is a really stark and disturbing relationship between failure to develop these basic skills of resilience and the strength of center in a human being and extreme ideologies, forms of bigotry. We call this behavior deranged for a reason. Part of the context for the rise of anti-Semitism on campus is that students are not learning how to cope for themselves, how to be resilient. They want enemies, they want nefarious forces they can blame for their problems. What do you think?

Levenson

I think that's absolutely right. To some extent, they're in need of, although usually don't recognize that they're in need of, some transcendent focus and some larger cause. But the transcendent focus and larger cause that came from traditional religion, from the humanities in an older model have largely disappeared, at least from *their* lives. Therefore, the absolutistic judgments and the absolute moralistic judgments and the camaraderie of being in a mob appeals to them. That also contributes to that unfortunate atmosphere on campus. It may not last. We'll see. But this is a more serious threat to the educational enterprise than most people recognize.

Forster

It is a reflection of our problems that these students are steeped in the university yet have not found a better cause to which to devote themselves. That actually leads me to my next question.

We've been talking for a while now about the mission of the university. What is the purpose of a university? In what ways do you think the public at large has a good understanding of the mission of the university? In what ways does the public at large have not so good an understanding of the mission of the university?

Levenson

There's a widespread confusion of liberal arts education with vocational school. In other words, the key thing is to acquire serviceable skills as opposed to the full development of the mind and the character. Those things that, as you say, are good in and of themselves. Considering the cost of college today, considering the economic constraints, one can see why there is this pressure

from parents and from society at large to make education primarily into a kind of vocational school. Who wants to pursue something that's useless? Of course, this presupposes that the psyche, the character, the soul are in and of themselves useless, which is a major problem to anyone who believes in liberal arts education. Universities often contribute to this misunderstanding by stressing the financial advantages and playing down the classical, literary, philosophical, theological, artistic dimensions of liberal arts. They play them down in favor of the practical.

I'm not against the practical, nor am I saying everybody should go to a liberal arts college. Obviously, I'm including the sciences. By no means is that my point. But if you do attend a liberal arts college or you are actually going to a real university, then, in fact, attention should be paid to how this differs from vocational school. One of the sad things to me is it's quite possible to do both. I know people who have gone to college and majored in some literary, philosophical, religious field, and then immediately afterward gone into medical school, law school. You don't necessarily have to continue with what you major in, but it's very important to make exploration, as I mentioned earlier, a central goal of why you're in college at all, if it's in the liberal arts model, not the vocational or technical model.

Forster

Of course, there's no contradiction between getting a liberal arts undergraduate education and then going off and using it in the professions. That would seem to me to confirm the usefulness of a liberal arts education.

Levenson

Yes, it is useful, but it's of value even if it isn't useful. Even though it doesn't contribute to your earning potential or to how well you do your job in some sort of office or whatever afterward, there are things that are useful in and of themselves in the sense that they promote the well-being of the mind and the well-being of the person, and they need to be pursued for their own sake alongside all the more practical considerations that everybody understands.

Forster

The word "useful" is dangerously ambiguous. It can mean useful for the cultivation of the soul, or it can mean I can make a buck off it. We have to be clear about what we mean.

Levenson

The usefulness for the cultivation of the soul, that is not the uppermost concern in most universities today.

Forster

When the value of a diploma is stressed in an economic way without being connected to anything that involves cultivation of the soul, that helps create an environment where students get the impression it doesn't really matter what they study, what they believe, they're here to get

a piece of paper that an employer will value. That probably feeds into some of the other dysfunctions we were talking about earlier.

Levenson

That's right. Credentialing, the notion you're there to get that piece of paper, to have the checkmark that you did this, you did that is a major problem with education. It shouldn't be reduced to vocational school. It shouldn't be reduced to political activism. And it shouldn't be reduced to simply getting a credential that enables you to move on to the next step.

Forster

We've looked in a few dark corners here, Jon, so I want to end on a hopeful note. What has pleasantly surprised you in your work over the last, say, five years?

Levenson

That's a tough one. A lot of things have unpleasantly surprised me over the last five years. But I would have to say in my own field of Hebrew Bible and ancient Jewish thought, theology, and literature, I've been pleasantly surprised by a steady stream of excellent graduate students, especially doctoral students, who are rigorous in their philology but also appreciative of the larger literary shape and artistry of the text. Some are committed in a sophisticated and tolerant way to understanding its theology. Increasingly, I've seen among my students, including non-Jewish students, an interest in the history of traditional Jewish biblical interpretation in midrash and medieval commentary and an awareness of how this can help the modern biblical scholar without being reduced to the question of how it can help the modern biblical scholar.

None of this substitutes for rigorous historical work in the modern mode, informed by knowledge of the ancient Near East. The ability, though, of many of these young scholars to be able to juggle these different paradigms without absolutizing any one of them is very gratifying to me. More students than are willing to say so publicly have a sense that putting the central focus on identity and power relations is leaving something precious out. I don't think it's fashionable or in some circles acceptable to say that in academia today, but I keep finding a fair number of students who, in fact, think exactly that. That makes me hopeful against all these negative signs for the future of the academic life.

Forster

I talk to a lot of faculty, and I ask them questions like, what's life-giving for you? The answer almost always involves students: seeing light bulbs go off in these bright young minds and seeing them, as you were describing, embrace better ways of exploring this material than the reductionistic options that are being shoved at them very aggressively. Reality is still there under the surface of all the propaganda and ideology, and the reality is exciting and interesting and grabs hold of people.

Levenson

That's right. A lot of them are very excited by the joy of discovery, the joy of exploration, the joy of surprise. You can't be much of a scholar or much of a cultivated, literate individual if you are not open to wonder. It's interesting to see how many students, even in this age of professionalism and politicization, are very much committed to wonder and discovery.

Forster

Amen to that. Well, Jon, shalom to you, and thank you so much for being with us.

Levenson

Thank you very much for inviting me. I enjoyed our conversation, Greg.