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Dear Colleague:

What is liberal education? One attempt at UW to broaden the students' mind is to require all of them to take a course in Ethnic Studies. Such a step is indeed broadening for white middle-class students, but it cannot do much for ethnic students from challenged backgrounds, except perhaps to make them feel as though they had never left home and hence as little challenged as possible.

What about the nature of reality as a broadening theme? Two approaches to the question "nature of reality" have recently caught my attention. One is rather an old chestnut--I mean the mysterious relationship between mathematics and reality. Let me give one elementary example, drawn from the biography of the mathematician Alan Turing. He came across D'Arcy Thompson's Growth and Form (1917) as a young man, and was fascinated by Thompson's attempt at showing the mathematical ordering of biological nature. Turing himself was charmed by the Fibonacci numbers--the series 1,1,2,3,5,8,13, 21,34...in which each term is the sum of the previous two. They turn up in the leaf arrangement and flower patterns of many common plants. How clever of God!

The other approach is raised by the philosopher Donald Davidson. He says something like this. The earth is an independent identifiable piece of reality that people can map in different--significantly different--ways: just think of the variety of projections in modern cartography. Ok. He then asks (and I can see bright-eyed students asking with him): Is having different schemes about reality the same as having different maps (schemes) about the earth (a reality)? No, says, Donaldson, for unlike mapping the earth, "there is no independent way of identifying 'reality' except by talking about it and interacting with it." Moreover, Davidson argues that the conceptual schemes cannot be very different, because, in the light of his theory of language and conditions of truth, languages and interactions with reality must be much more alike than anthropologists and contemporary humanists have led us to believe.

Here, then, is something philosophical which yet can interest geographers and contributes, moreover, to the current heated debate on universality and cultural particularism--a debate that can hardly be resolved by plunging into Ethnic Studies alone. We learn much at Grandma's knee, yes, but not the Fibonacci numbers in plants unless Grandma has had a wonderful liberal education. True, Fibonacci is not a Chinese, but he can be a Ninja Turtle for all that I care! And that, dear colleague, is a characteristic Chinese--indeed Confucian--attitude.

Best wishes,

Yi-Fu