9.68 Affect: Biological, Psychological, and Social Aspects of "Feelings"
Spring 2009

Class Meeting   6
March 10
Theme: What is Quality in Education?

PREPARATION:
    READ: 6-1   Smith, P., (1990) Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America
               (excerpts) Chapter 1: "Mapping the Desert" (pp. 1-21); and Chapter 14:
               "Teaching" (pp. 199-222)

    WRITE: Reaction Paper #6   Quality and My MIT Education

CLASS NOTES:

What is good and what is not good in education?

Particularly in its latter parts, "ZAAMM..." had rather a lot to say about this question.

How is the question relevant to our inquiry into values? In respect to the MFA experience, our stress was largely upon the basic constancies and the great diversities of opinion among us regarding the aesthetic value of particular works of art. Last week, we considered some of the ways in which the distinction between "classical" and "romantic" plays itself out in the domain of scientific inquiry. This week, we shift our attention to a realm "closer to home" and inquire into the prospects for achieving consensual agreement. (Why might we be inclined to seek such a consensus?)

To begin with, compare and contrast Pirsig's comments on education with those of the noted historian Page Smith, whose contention it was that the crisis in American universities is connected with the trend toward research and away from teaching.

Recalling what was said earlier about the complementarity of differing perspectives, we presume at the outset that all of us (1) have our own unique educational experiences and (2) can this lay claim to an equipotentially legitimate modicum of knowledge and skill when it comes to evaluating the quality (or lack thereof) of their own educational experiences in general, and of their MIT learning experience as an MIT undergraduate student, in particular.

Do you recall Pirsig's discussion of "platform" problems? Taking the proverbial "step back," we will endeavor to get beneath the surface details (which are always uniquely specific and particular) and bring into focus some of the more general conceptual and material universals that characterize, epitomize and exemplify the beliefs, values and practices prevailing within the MIT academic community of which we are all presently a part.

This is not intended to be a "bitching session."

By hypothesis: human social systems (families, tribes, communities, churches, temples, academic, vocational or professional associations, schools and universities, cliques, claques, clubs, teams, leagues, gangs, cohorts, fraternities, sororities, local, regional or global membership organizations, corporations, nationstates, and all sorts of other groups) universally exhibit a particular self-maintaining and recurrently self-reinforcing homeostasis – a dynamic equilibrium blended of cognitive, affective and behavioral (receptive/reactive) aspects that can be understood as comprising a "paradigm" (prototypical pattern of beliefs, values and practices).

Do our respective and collective experiences as members of the MIT community enable us to arrive at consensual agreement regarding the beliefs, values and practices that are most central to this community and its subsystems?

NOTE: This is a kind of "experiment." It poses as an empirical question whether or not it is possible for you – this particular subset of MIT undergraduates, belonging to 9.68/07 – to arrive in a scientifically credible, ethically appropriate and pedagogically sound way at a consensually valid working definition of "the MIT paradigm"?

Can you meaningfully identify and effectively "unpack" at least a few of the key worldviews, value systems and lifestyles with which MIT is most readily associated and widely known? What do you know about locally prevailing institutional norms? What beliefs, values and practices tend to predominate? Is that which is "professed" consistently practiced in actuality?
Are there any worthwhile beliefs, values and practices that tend to be subordinated in the process of "getting an MIT education."?

By hypothesis, the "MIT value system" and "MIT worldview" are associated with a variety of lifestyles (home lives, work lives). Which lifestyles do you most positively (or negatively) associate with the Institute's motto: "Mens et Manus"?

In class, we will make some time available for in-depth discussion of these and other aspects of the concept of "quality" as it relates to the presumably meaningful/powerful phrase: "an MIT education".

Is it possible for human individuals and groups to arrive however provisionally, at broad and fundamental agreement on a range of basic propositions relating to the world and its contents, including ourselves (e.g. to human/ecological relations).?

NOTES ABOUT ASSIGNMENTS:

writing assignment #6

"Home is where one starts from." MIT is a topic regarding which all of you can unquestionably lay claim to equipotentially credible first-hand "expert" opinions! Thus, in your remarks, begin, if you must, with the usual clichés. But also try to go beyond them as much as possible. Be as precise and specifically detailed as you can about your

own first-hand experience. For example, you might choose to identify and describe some aspect(s) of student life and learning during the freshman year; or focus on an activity or activities that you participated in and/or observed and which you regard as having been of spectacularly "high" or abysmally "low" educational quality. Consider (if you wish) your "homelife" experience with peers in living groups; your "real life" (family, friends, sports, recreation, hobbies or other extracurricular activities), as well as your MIT "worklife." How mentally and behaviorally well prepared were you for your encounter with the first year science core curriculum? With this assignment, we're consciously touching upon a subject of broad current concern in the MIT community (the GIRs) and inviting you to take it as a basis from which to begin making a serious effort to describe and to evaluate – in a scientifically informed and consensually credible way, insofar as you can in this context – what it means to speak of "quality" in relation to the MIT educational experience. Bring this reaction paper with you to class. Be prepared to use it as a basis for your participation in the discussion.