Summary of “Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts”

In his essay “Examsmanship and the Liberal Arts,” William Perry, a faculty member at Harvard University, (I) explores the “phenomenon of bull” in order to question (II) the epistemological underpinnings of a liberal education and (III) the meaning and method of giving grades.

In order to illustrate and explain the concept of bull, Perry tells the story of Mr. Metzger, a student who took a test for a class he hadn’t taken, achieving an A–, while many of the actual students got Cs. Perry explains that the C students had plenty of data and were diligent but failed to make their data relevant—they “cowed”—and that Metzger had no data but was able to make very relevant generalizations—he “bulled.” The dilemma for teachers, as Perry puts it, is that cowing actually deserves an E (though teachers rarely have the heart to give it), and bulling, though immoral, “expresses an important part of what a pluralist university holds dear,” that is, teaching students “how to think.”

Perry uses this to claim that the theory of knowledge promoted in a liberal education is sound, that “collected ‘facts’” do not “constitute knowledge,” rather, knowledge lies in the union of context and data. Students who bull, therefore, are naturally close to the inquiry of systems that the liberal arts values, though they are missing the diligence and data of students who cow. Students who cow, however, are missing the boat entirely. Through giving grades, Perry concludes, instructors “describe for the students . . . what [they] believe about the nature of knowledge”; thus, giving Cs for cowing is not a “mercy” after all.