

Education and a Free Society

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Because contemporary scholars have redefined freedom in terms of relativism and progress, negative consequences plague the educational establishment. With deceptive rhetoric, relativism promises freedom and fairness but delivers confusion and apathy. In the vogue concern for “progress,” individual worth is demeaned and individual lives sacrificed. In short, society has traded in the freedom to live wise, deep, disciplined lives for a shallow, soul-sapping substitute that Plato would call “enslaving.” A return to liberal education, in the classical sense, means a renewed focus on developing deep-thinking, liberty-minded persons. By cultivating the minds and virtue of individuals, such an education acts as an essential safeguard to a free society. Therefore, a chief aim of every teacher should be to cultivate liberally educated students who pursue truth and delight in wisdom.

John Henry Newman, in his essential educational text *The Idea of a University*, describes liberal education as an intellectual cultivation that enlarges and perfects the mind. Liberal knowledge “is an acquired illumination, it is a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment” (85). The illumination does not spring from utility-focused know-how, learned for an exam and then discarded. Rather, it flows from the study of philosophical knowledge, which is acted upon by reason and concerned with general ideas. Liberal education is deep, permanent, and essentially human; it cannot be safely discarded in favor of the utilitarian job training prevalent in current institutions of higher learning.

A tenet of liberal learning is that all knowledge forms a whole. As Newman explains, liberal learning allows perception of the unity of knowledge by illuminating the connections among

branches of knowledge. In a discussion of varied fields of study, Renaissance humanist Giambattista Vico observes: “Because these studies, which are joined by nature...have been split up and confused by the foibles of men, they appear to be many, but in reality they are not many but are one and the same perceived in many different lights” (484). What is the content that should compose a unified liberal education? Liberal learning is usually grounded in the Greek and Roman canon and built on the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric, which progressively develop a student’s capacity for memorization, ideological comprehension, and synthesized expression. Most plans of study include moral philosophy, theology, ancient languages, history, geography, poetry, music, and the basics of mathematics and physical sciences. Moral philosophy and theology, in particular, provide a framework: a student can then connect all other facts and books to form a comprehensive worldview.

The need for a unified, philosophical understanding of knowledge is built into human nature. Aristotle wrote that all objects and people have a *telos*, or end: the perfect development of the object or person. Newman argues that the concept of *telos* applies to the intellect; that is, the intellect should strive toward beauty and perfection. “We perfect our nature...by adding to it what is more than nature, and directing it towards aims higher than its own,” Newman elaborates (93). Education is the “more than nature” ingredient that moves our intellect toward its *telos*. This end—intellectual beauty—cannot be properly considered useful, for intellectual cultivation is an abstract attainment composed of the beautiful, the good, and the true. Knowledge is its own reward, “sufficient to rest in and pursue for its own sake” (Newman 78).

The idea of knowledge “for its own sake” is foreign to a modern university system, in which education is quantified: number of graduates, their success in landing jobs, pages of research published, and concrete scientific discoveries. In contrast, liberal education is inherently

unquantifiable. Its fruit is a certain kind of individual: a man or woman who delights in truth, knows morality and justice, understands the flow of ideas through history, and participates with eloquence in the centuries-long conversation of great minds. Each facet of a balanced education develops a quality of the whole person, as Francis Bacon explains: “Histories make men wise; poets, witty; the mathematics, subtle; natural philosophy, deep; moral, grave; logic and rhetoric, able to contend” (1542). The greatest practical result is a general culture of mind that prepares a person for any calling and which has been a characteristic of virtually every great man.

The liberally educated individual is a free person—free from preconceptions, sloth, and relativism and free to study, enjoy, and do the good. Wisdom begets freedom of thought, whereas ignorance is bondage. Slaves are “those who are ignorant of the beautiful and good and just,” said Socrates (Xenophon 34). Xenophon records a Socratic dialogue to prove that every man needs instruction in wisdom to be freed from ignorance. Through skillful questions, Socrates humbles a prideful young man named Euthydemus, convincing him that even he needs a teacher in order to gain wisdom. After this encounter with Socrates, “he [Euthydemus] went away very dejected, disgusted with himself and convinced that he was indeed a slave” (37). Recognition of his insufficiency was the young man’s first step to wisdom, and Euthydemus subsequently clung to Socrates for further mentoring. The attainment of wisdom and, ultimately, of freedom, begins with humility: understanding human nature and one’s own limitations.

A clear understanding of human nature leads to wise studies and valuable contributions to human society. Giambattista Vico posits that man is composed of “mind, spirit and capacity for language,” and, according to his Judeo-Christian view of human fallenness, all three parts are corrupted. Studies should correspond to the deficiencies of human nature—in Vico’s schema, to the three corrupted parts of human beings. In other words, a man “cultivate[s] these studies in

order to improve his character and inform his mind with truth, his spirit with virtue, and his speech with eloquence so that he becomes constant with himself as a man and, as much as possible, able to help human society” (Vico 480). Vico says men with these three aspects of wisdom then “foster with zeal the society of men” by guiding ignorant people to be good citizens. “The wise,” he writes, “have led isolated man into union, that is, from love of self to the fostering of the human community, from sluggishness to purposeful activity, from unrestrained license to compliance with law and by conferring equal rights united those unbridled in their strength with the weak” (480). The liberal education described by Vico is leadership training of the best kind. The liberally educated person, released from selfish passions and foolish ignorance, is thereby freed to obey wisdom and nobly serve society.

History is replete with the costly errors of those who believed they were serving society. Well-meaning people can do more harm than good; they enslave men while attempting to liberate them. In contrast, all positive movements in history have been put in action through clear, mature, profound thinking, which a liberal education fosters. The development of “right thinking” in individuals is the long-lasting societal benefit of the Great Tradition, argues Albert Jay Nock in *The Theory of Education in the United States*. Ideas have consequences: influential decision-makers must understand morality, justice, and ideologies in order to sustain freedom. How will future leaders understand if they are not taught well?

Today, intellectual liberty in the university is inhibited by those who deny the consequences of ideas. Moral norms and objective standards of justice, now taboo, are replaced by relativism and “social justice.” If one claims to know the right view, one is insulting all other views. How does the conflict of relativism and objective truth manifest itself? In the field of literature, classic approaches are overwhelmed by modern critical theory. Rather than objectively studying

the significance of a text, scholars formulate relativistic interpretations. Instead of discerning literary responses to the big questions (What is truth? What is man and how should he live? What is his relation to the divine?), scholars use narrow theories to examine what the text says about the self, “otherness,” female empowerment, or sexual tension, for instance. If a literary critic interprets a text from the stance of knowableness, she is asserting obnoxious, black-and-white objectivity in what Allan Bloom calls “a gray network of critical concepts” (43).

In *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom discusses academic opposition to firm belief. He argues at length that the modern virtue of “openness” has closed our minds. To be “open” is to equally value all cultures, religions, ideas, etc.—no one is “right” or “wrong.” After all, history tells us that wars and other evils were caused by people who claimed to be right. However, this relativistic openness creates an attitude of indifference among students. Bloom writes, “Relativism has extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life” (34). If it doesn’t matter which ideas you choose, why bother to learn any?

The alternative to the “openness of indifference” is the “openness that invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude” (Bloom 41). If things can be known—if deep, important questions can be answered—then education is eminently meaningful and satisfying, even thrilling. Relativistic education, in contrast, is like wandering in a blinding sandstorm with a parched throat. There is no hope of finding your way, because there is no destination. Eventually, hopeless thirst recedes into apathy and the traveler stops hoping for a path. The soul waits to die. Alternatively, belief in objective truth, especially religious truth, offers a destination, solid footing, spiritual and mental sustenance, guidance on the pathway, and an oasis of refreshing water. Firm belief is the best basis for bold, far-reaching, broad-minded scholarship.

It is the calling of a teacher to counteract indifference by cultivating delight and wonder in knowledge, freeing the student to love what is best and develop wise beliefs. Delight in studies is an essential motivation and rich reward for the liberally educated scholar. Leonardo Bruni called humane studies “beautiful and intellectually rewarding” (337). For this reason, sixteenth-century scholar Thomas Elyot states that elementary teachers should be primarily concerned with fostering love of learning in their young charges. He suggests introducing easy stories early in language instruction and enriching historical studies with the exploits of great heroes and wise men (409). According to Vico, the goal of childhood and adolescent studies is “to accustom the mind to true things, so that as soon as it is so accustomed, it may enjoy them” (483). Because many college students have not yet discovered intellectual enjoyment, this advice can be helpful for university instructors as well. Cultivating a sense of wonder should be a primary goal of each professor.

Successful scholars join delight to intensity of purpose. Because liberal learning is a time-consuming, demanding, lifelong endeavor, those who persevere are those who find joy in it. A.G. Sertillanges claims, “The most valuable thing of all is will, deeply rooted will; to will to be somebody, to achieve something; to be even now in desire that somebody, recognizable by his ideal” (576). Many students want to be something, but they have not learned to will it. They think they can be anything they want by just being, and they are continually disappointed by life. By learning from past wisdom and developing studious discipline, they gain the wisdom to will a noble goal, the steadiness to hold it fast, and the discipline to accomplish it.

If left to drift or confined to narrow corners, the souls and intellects of human beings cannot escape damage. Classical, liberal education takes into account a whole person made in the image of God, complete with the wonders and frailties shared by humanity. Illuminating and

strengthening the mind, education allows individuals to humbly recognize human limitations and then steadily build toward the *telos* of intellectual beauty. The teaching relationship, in particular, encourages individuals to relish intellectual efforts, which ultimately bestow the freedom to know, believe, delight, persevere and accomplish. Free, educated leaders of this variety are the mainstay of a thriving society.

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