

PROBLEMS IN THE HISTORY OF LIBERAL EDUCATION IN WESTERN THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

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Qualifications

I must begin this essay with an important set of qualifications. First, the perspective adopted in this essay is largely if not solely Anglo-American. However, as American higher education in particular has been experimental from an early age, and has struggled with many imported versions of liberal education, the difficulties of what I write will be recognizable in other national systems.

A second qualification is that important words or conceptions do not always translate well, being special to national cultures. They are elusive and lost in translation. Caution is necessary.

The elusive words in this essay are “liberal” as in “liberal education” or “the liberal arts,” “general” as in “general education” or “humanities” to indicate knowledge domains. None of these categories is obvious. None is stable. All have been argued about over centuries. The words “humanism” and “humanistic” are also troublesome. Often associated with the liberal arts, they are then merely descriptive or synonymous with a liberal arts education. However, the words “humanistic,” or “humanism” as operative, can also suggest a concern for something broader or deeper, something that is understood to be the “human condition.” This is perhaps the most idealistic and uplifting of the meanings that we should associate with liberal education.

In discussing liberal education, one must always remember that while we may be able to describe “inputs,” we can never be certain that inputs will equal “outputs.” The claim as to whether a particular kind of education guarantees a particular kind of educated person must be carefully stated. Liberal education is non-vocational, at least today. In former ages and societies, liberal education was education for small numbers of elites, those who were usually of high social status. Merit selection was uneven. Employment for the privileged was more or less guaranteed, especially with respect to positions in government or churches. But in today’s mass-access higher education world, we cannot speak with confidence about the relationship of liberal instruction to careers despite the well-intentioned efforts to assure parents and publics that employers are eager to

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cooperate. Notice, however, how often the market-value of a liberal education is discussed in terms of skills and proficiencies. The ones frequently named are critical reasoning, independence of mind, verbal and written ability and workplace collaboration. But these criteria, assuredly indispensable, do not touch upon the deeper moral and characterological vision carried by notable iterations of liberal education.² Nor do they usually include “civic virtue,” education for citizenship, another of the historic goals of liberal education dating back to ancient civilizations.

I have another qualification that pertains to all fields of knowledge but one that is especially pertinent to liberal education. No teacher, and certainly no student, can ever grasp or master but a tiny portion of what is known. All knowledge requires some level of selection. And whatever is selected must still be interpreted. Furthermore, the knowledge base today is far larger than when universities first began in the twelfth century.³ I will limit myself to a simple observation. Since the knowledge base is so huge, I as a teacher must decide what portion of it can be practically used for the kind of teaching that can be considered “liberal.” I must decide how to present the material, how to examine its ramifications and how to keep its leading elements germane to the aims of a liberal understanding. And, no matter how annoying it is to think of liberal education ideals in terms of market-relatedness and employability, such concerns inevitably force themselves into the conversation.

If as part of a liberal education I assign a particular literary text to students, or a work of history, I have options as to how I can explicate the material. These options may involve an interpretation based on a preferred ideological or political approach, social agenda or a set of moral judgements. I may try to pursue an understanding that is “value-free,” objective, allowing the student considerable latitude in exploring texts and problems. As there is no “correct” interpretation, a certain confusion results, bearing in mind, however, that some interpretations are critically superior to others, more rigorously argued and more faithful to the actual material being presented. Let us not drown in disingenuous relativism: it may even be said that a mature form of liberal education encourages the mental discipline that allows for the making of fine distinctions.

For centuries educators worried that undergraduates, who were most often only of high school age, would become emotionally unsettled if they were exposed to the contradictory views and learned disputes of their teachers. Or, when the age of entry to universities increased, once released from the former constraints, youth would be encouraged to challenge supposedly settled religious opinions and political institutions. These fears notwithstanding (depending upon country and period), many of them subsided. Wherever national liberal democracy prevailed, colleges and universities became more tolerant of unorthodox and dissenting viewpoints. Yet campus authorities still had to decide whether some institutional rules of conduct were necessary to protect sites dedicated to study and learning. In America, these decisions fell to academic deans

2 E.g.: “Among the highest rated outcomes employers were seeking in 2020 are the ability to work in teams, critical thinking, the ability to analyze and interpret data, the application of knowledge in real-world settings and digital literacy.” Lynn Pasquerella, President of the Association of American Universities and Colleges, in her paper (September 10, 2021) prepared for the Blue Waves series sponsored by University College, Yonsei University, South Korea.

3 But in all countries of the world, many other types of educational systems existed prior to the first appearance of universities in Italy, France and England. These were located in royal courts, monasteries, academies or municipalities. See Roy Lowe and Yoshihito Yasuhara, *The Origins of Higher Learning, Knowledge Networks and the Early Development of Universities* (Routledge: London and New York, 2017).

of students. Their authority successfully challenged by the student radical activists of the 1960s, deans of students lost their conventional authority and new, more legal and formal rules of conventional behavior were substituted.

The Campus as a “Place”

I would like to offer another suggestion about how to go about discussing the meaning and efficacy of a liberal education. We are accustomed to thinking of liberal education in terms of subject curricula and how they can be interpreted in the classroom. There is however one other and interesting dimension to a liberal education. It is the actual physical environment in which education takes place. I will therefore say a few words about the very American idea of a university or college “campus” (from the Latin for a field, a camp). Not only has the idea of dedicated space for learning become so attractive that non-Anglophone nations have taken up campus-planning for education. High-tech industries also refer to their grounds and buildings as a “campus,” as do the extensive health facilities that are features of the last decades. The word has come to mean a special place filled with symbols, iconography, statuary, playful structures, distinguishing features, borrowings and references to bygone eras and great personalities. In sum, the planned campus is in itself an educational experience. It is intended to draw the student (mainly the undergraduate) inward to the institution and away from the outside. An added intention is to strength student loyalty to the institution which can be later called upon for financial support. The campus also provides the unity and shared identity difficult to gain in our own age of the supremacy of the fragmented discipline.

The original or medieval university was an urban institution, founded to serve the needs of municipal populations. Academic structures were scattered about the city without an identity distinct from that of the urban interface. Cossetting undergraduates was not a desired strategy apart from Oxford and Cambridge. Universities historically relied upon state or ecclesiastical support, with exceptions. Student loyalty was not critical on the Continent. Examinations were often set by national authorities. In nineteenth-century Germany students wandered about from institution to institution, sitting the lectures of the great scholars. The individual institution was secondary.

The word “campus” dates back to late eighteenth century. It is first attributed to the large grassed areas or lawns at Princeton University. The ultimate origin of a campus (although without a “field”) is earlier, probably borrowed from the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, that is to say, a collection of classrooms, student and faculty residences, a library, dining and recreation areas, possibly a religious chapel erected within high walls separating the gown from the town. The idea of purpose-built structures in proximity to one another was taken over by university colleges in the United States, but the major difference is that the American “campus,” unlike the Oxbridge colleges, is open not walled (although symbolic entry gates announce that the spaces to be entered are special and possibly in some cases private). The availability of land and a democratic ethos – free access – made possible the expansion of the small college into the larger university of a century later.

The campus in America was first created for youth at their most impressionable age. That is why until quite recently liberal education was always spoken of as synonymous with being young. However, in teaching lifelong learning courses for adults, and post-retirement adults at that, I have found willing and enthusiastic audiences for the kinds of subjects conventionally formed under the heading of liberal education. Perhaps it is worth discussing whether in fact the long association between liberal education and coming-

of-age is far too restrictive. Perhaps growing old is in some respects an ideal time to receive some versions of liberal education, when conventional careers but not life's agreeable possibilities have ended. Attractive environments are not the answer to every problem besetting our societies, but try to imagine what the effect of bedraggled physical circumstances has on a desire to learn.⁴

The Origins of Liberal Education in Universities

Scholars trace the origins of liberal education in western thought back to the Greek scientists, philosophers and sophists of the classical periods of the fourth and fifth centuries B.C.E. A tendency exists to overlook the salient ethical and political contributions to liberal education made by the intellectuals who gave us the Hebrew Bible; but in some versions of liberal education taught in colonial America, the Old Testament was part of a curriculum largely composed of "classics." At the end of the seventeenth century, the word "classics" came to mean a superior kind of literature, Greek and Roman. Undergraduates were required to also study Greek and Latin as the languages of the classics. Some acquaintance with these languages was regarded as the mark of an educated person. Those who were not given the chance to study the classical languages were dismissed as socially inferior and ill-educated. In the long run these distinctions could not be tolerated in societies purportedly democratic and where the bulk of the student population found the learning of classical languages to be onerous, expensive, time-consuming and occupationally useless.

Around 1900 a British theologian and historian, Hastings Rashdall, wrote a seminal history of the beginnings of the university, arguing that the primary reason for the appearance of universities was professional education – what would confusingly become known as the "liberal professions" of medicine, law and theology. The context was the revival of cities as the important loci of innovation and economic growth. The simultaneous development of large political units and the need for administrators in church and state encouraged professional studies. Some guild models of apprenticeship were replaced by formal and systematic degree studies. The guild idea of self-government was absorbed into the university in what later would be termed "collegiate governance," a subject that lies outside my present remit. Before Rashdall, the prevailing sentiment was that the first universities were established to further liberal education as inherited from classical civilization, especially in the form of the seven Roman liberal arts. These were divided into two categories, the trivium and the quadrivium, broadly a division into the structure of languages and mathematics. The first consisted of three subjects: logic, grammar and rhetoric. The second was distinguished by arithmetic, astronomy, music and geometry.

The point about the seven liberal arts in the earliest universities was that it was preparatory to professional education, providing the foundation for the study of law, medicine and divinity. A liberal education was not necessarily intended to be an end in itself. Thus, unlike today, its utility did not require special justification. Since relatively few students ever went to universities, where in any case the cost and social circumstances

4 For a fuller discussion of the campus as an environment for liberal education, see Sheldon Rothblatt, "Consult the *Genius* of the Place," in *The Modern University and Its Discontents, The Fate of Newman's Legacies in Britain and America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chapter 2. This book has been translated into Chinese. Attractive as is the conception of special or as we might say privileged spaces for learning, it is undeniable that creative research or standard teaching takes place in structures that are not campuses but high-rise buildings in city centers.

Knowledge is one thing, virtue is another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility... Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentlemen. It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life – these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge;... still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness, they may attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless – pleasant, alas, and attractive as he shows when decked out in them.

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led to a high student drop-out rate, it made sense to think that if students attended at all, they would at least receive some of the basics of a university education. An important footnote to the background of the medieval uses of liberal education was the remarkable influence of one classical writer in particular, the Greek philosopher Aristotle, whose comprehensive writings provided a unity to the teaching of the liberal arts that remained an unrealized ideal for centuries. Interestingly enough, as taught in the early universities, Aristotelian scholarship was based primarily on his Arabic and Jewish interpreters living in the great centers of Islamic thought in Spain and the Middle East rather than on his own texts, many of which had been lost and were only subsequently recovered.

Transformations in the Medieval Curriculum

As I noted earlier, a description of a particular curriculum does not provide an accurate guide as to how that curriculum is actually taught, nor is it sufficient to enable us to understand why so many

academic quarrels occur. As the centuries moved on, and scholarly controversies continued as they must because of the very nature of human curiosity, or vested interests, antagonists of the medieval curriculum denounced it as overly technical and narrowly focused, even as too intellectual and theoretical. Some of the accusations were correct, but others misleading, for within the trivium and quadrivium innovations and radical interpretations kept intruding, major disagreements over the teaching of logic for example, or architecture and political science creeping in almost unnoticed. Science, informed by mathematics, may not have been experimental, a hallmark of the Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century, but it did exist as “thought experiments” with more influence in the following centuries than detractors allowed. The transmission of inherited learning not research was the mission of the earliest universities, but to suggest that it did not exist is a simplification. As all knowledge must be interpreted, departures from the norm occur almost without notice.

Not to overly exaggerate, it is the case that the period that in the west is called the Italian Renaissance, starting in the fifteenth century and spreading from the Mediterranean region to northern Europe, contains a shift in conceptions of the content and purpose of liberal education. The first point is that a liberal education, or the liberal arts, was no longer just preparatory to professional education, providing the theoretical foundations of medicine, law and divinity. It was now an end in itself and to be valued for itself. A liberally-educated person was regarded as having an identifiable character. He was a “gentleman” or a “courtier.” Women too were expected to possess some of the virtues of a liberal education. (It is not far-fetched to align the courtier tradition with the mandarin conceptions of China.⁵) To have the right character meant studying subjects from the

5 For which see Joseph Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, a Trilogy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

perspective of the desired outcome: a prominent place in high society. And it meant emphasizing subjects that did not receive full attention in the medieval curriculum, such as lyrical poetry, especially the writing of sonnets, playing musical instruments, literature, music, dancing and equestrian ability. Such an education, and the behavior that followed, was also called “humanistic” because of the emphasis on style and comportment.

Critics would later regard this particularly Italian inheritance as snobbish and superficially intellectual and overly aesthetic, with a misplaced emphasis on manners and style. Were those who appeared to have the right social attainments actually sincere, or as we might say, “authentic?” Furthermore, much of the pedagogy that students received was bookish, tedious and less sparkling than promised. Doubtless many of the suspicions and accusations were correct. Expectedly, the Italian ideal was not carried out in every circumstance. Not every recipient of courtly education was a skilled swordsman, not all could write excellent sonnets, dance gracefully or be devastating with the ladies. But defined aims existed and so gave purpose to instruction.

New modes of understanding liberal education were sometimes resisted in the universities, or they crept in from time to time, but in the beginning the home of Renaissance forms of liberal education took place within special institutions or academies. The line to the numerous American four-year liberal arts colleges was not direct, but the academies were in a sense an adumbration.

The Challenges of Research

We can now turn to the most important of European Continental influences of the modern period, that of the revolution in learning and the mission of a university that developed in Germany following that nation’s defeat by French armies in the early nineteenth century. To repeat, I have noted that the dissemination of knowledge, the emphasis on “received knowledge,” and its relation to professional education was the declared mission of the medieval university. Similarly, received knowledge, using newer and recovered Greek sources from the Byzantine Empire, meant character formation rather than occupation, what the celebrated Roman Catholic intellectual of Victorian England would reiterate as “the making of men.”⁶ We must now consider the effect on liberal education of a different conception, anticipated but not fulfilled by the medieval university and far more wide-reaching and revolutionary than anything seen before.

For historians, explaining the cause of a major transformation is always difficult. It is not immediately apparent why change should occur, except that when societies undergo a profound shared crisis, remedies are sought to repair the damage to national sensibility. Such remedies can be borrowings from other cultures, but they can also be a reexamination of a nation’s own intellectual or spiritual legacies. Values and beliefs or even institutional arrangements that provide identity, comfort and reassurance – even if they are mythical in some respects – become a path to national regeneration.

The defeated German states (Germany not yet politically unified), especially Prussia, drew on their rich folkloric, Enlightenment and Romantic heritages to arrive at the conclusion that the means to a national recovery and spiritual reawakening should be based on a conception of knowledge greater in depth and more original than hitherto known in western thought. The establishment of the University of Berlin in 1810 is the

6 He was not thinking of women. Paul Shrimpton, *The “Making of Men.” The Idea and Reality of Newman’s University in Oxford and Dublin* (Leominster, Herts: Gracewing Publishing, 2014).

symbolic date of the institutionalization of a new conception of learning, but innovations begin to occur earlier in the universities of some of the lesser states and in the sector of secondary education. The fullest realization of the institutionalization of the new knowledge mission dates from perhaps 1850. By the end of the nineteenth century, or even before, every existing university in Europe, Britain and America was touched by German conceptions of specialized investigation. Scholars and students from outside the German states arrived there to watch and study with the new generations of professors who were remaking the map of learning in every imaginable manner. German conceptions regarding the importance of disciplinary specialization, discovery as the foundation of an academic career and original inquiry as the means by which an academic reputation was to be achieved - these were brought back to other countries. For now I will skip over the resistance in American and British universities to German academic values, except to say that in the beginning the scholars were uneasy if not entirely unaffected. They argued as did their medieval forebears that upsetting the conclusions of received knowledge threatened the emotional stability of undergraduates. They maintained that disciplinary specialization was unsuited to the purposes of liberal education when viewed as general knowledge or the shaping of character. They also disliked the fact that changing the basis upon which an academic career rested would jeopardize their own positions in colleges and universities. The quarrels existed for decades. Indeed, they still exist wherever liberal education and research are felt to be antagonistic.

There was one aspect of the German revolution in knowledge that strongly affected Anglo-American conceptions of the liberal arts and a humanistic education. Yet of all existing conceptions of a liberal education, it still remained the hardest to incorporate into foreign models. It was also the hardest to define since it derived from particularly German philosophical and intellectual traditions quite separate from Anglo-American pragmatic culture. *Bildung* (*bildning* in Swedish, *danelse* in Norwegian, nations closely in touch with German thought in the nineteenth century) was a doctrine of self-realization or self-improvement. A person who was correctly educated, *Gebildet*, embodied the essence or at least the highest qualities of a national culture. In a sense this was also characterological, if somewhat disembodied and therefore at odds with the less rigorously intellectual courtier traditions. Just how ethereal *Bildung* could be is illustrated in Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* where the principal characters are sickly (i.e., without body) and secluded in an alpine sanitarium. Mann's friend and frequent correspondent Hermann Hesse - both in exile from the Nazi takeover of Germany - pursued the idea of a high intellectual discipline representing the best of culture in his own novel, *The Glass Bead Game*. Again, in an isolated environment, this time monastic, a few carefully-selected minds spend their lives mastering an esoteric game that requires continual study, self-denial and unrelenting focus.

For certain minds, German intellectual and philosophical ideals were exciting and stimulating. Knowledge as *Bildung*, studied with the intensity of a research ideal, highly abstract and encompassing a unity that integrated all disciplines at superior levels of generalization and understanding, attracted foreigners who found their own national existing forms of liberal education shallow and closer in substance to a high school education than to a university-based degree program. But insofar as Britain and the United States did not possess a philosophical conception of a national culture, *Bildung* could only be a phantasm admired by intellectuals at odds with what they excoriated as the philistine cultures of their countries.

Bildung was more rarefied, far more abstract and theoretical than the more practical concerns of scholars in pluralistic Anglophone countries. And indeed, because the German states were autocratic, its rulers were fearful of knowledge that might challenge the existing legitimacy of government. German professors understood that theory and abstruse knowledge were safe ways to retain their academic positions (on the Continent, French and German academics were technically government civil servants). Absent from German thought, said overseas critics, was the view that knowledge pursued from a critical and scientific perspective was a corrective to poor government.

Nevertheless, however admired abroad, *Bildung* was actually at odds with Anglophone liberal individualist cultures. For although any number of American and English intellectuals envied the German emphasis on a high national culture, their nations were too individualistic, too heterogenous in their populations, too socially diverse to establish a university curriculum on the basis of a perceived central national culture. The most that could be achieved was to expose students to the best and most sophisticated models of an educated person, allowing each of them to find his or her own level of self-cultivation.

Such decisions, however unsatisfactory, were also a consequence of the structure of higher education in Britain and America, but especially in the latter nation. America's higher education system reflected the federal constitution and the social and religious pluralism of the country at large. It was compounded of colleges and universities that were either private or public, faith-based or secular, even unfortunately separated by perceived racial differences. Until very recently, there were also hundreds of women's colleges. In practice this meant that however much programs in liberal education borrowed from multiple traditions, they were often dissimilar in details and emphases. The uneven quality of secondary education in the United States, still distressing, meant that colleges and universities had to accept matriculants who were not prepared for serious or advanced instruction, making parts of the university curriculum a throwback to high school. More select colleges and universities could draw from superior secondary schools. Because student populations differed so widely in scholastic achievements, and because there was no commonly accepted version of a liberal education, colleges and universities were free to experiment and to search for their own forms of liberal education.

These have long been major differences between American and European systems of higher education. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, European higher education institutions began to resemble those in America. Some of the transforming challenges had become similar, notably, the shift from elite to mass higher education, alterations in the elite structure of secondary education, and a population more socially and ethnically diverse.

Liberal Education in the United States in the Twenty-first Century

The word "liberal" in the English language from the Latin *liberalis*, has numerous political and philosophical as well as psychological meanings. With respect to education, we can contrast "liberal" with "servile." This distinction, traceable to the ancient Greeks, Athenians in particular, was based on an alarming social reality, the fact that some people were free in a liberated condition and some were enslaved. Free men (never women), mainly because they did not have to work, had the leisure to be educated and to achieve a breadth of self-understanding. The freedom to study made them "whole" or "complete"

human beings.⁷ Free men were also citizens of Athens, expected to serve their city-state whenever required, and from this aspect of their community life derives the view that the exercise of “civic virtue” is a primary responsibility of anyone who dwells in a democracy. In the ancient world slaves did not possess the luxury to become complete human beings. In time other words captured similar distinctions. Liberally-educated persons were “civilized” or “cultivated” (*Gebildet*), “polite” or “polished.” The unprivileged were “vulgar” or “common,” illiberal, not only servile in condition but servile in outlook and mentality. In short, incomplete, their human capacity undeveloped.

But this has changed as access to higher education has widened and as egalitarian opportunities have become central. Until very recently vocational training did not possess the prestige associated with liberal education, but that advantage no longer exists in an age when technology, entrepreneurial talents and professional norms of service are dominant. Furthermore, media-driven entertainment culture and consumer hedonism have largely eclipsed any sense of a higher or better educational culture or models of the unfettered pursuit of self-realization. Few seekers of higher education are interested in a curriculum that purports to make them “whole,” balanced or harmonious. These have their supporters but are very likely regarded as more or less quaint and antiquated by others

I have referred to the fact that disciplinary specialization has been a formidable challenge to received views of liberal education as “holistic.” The fact is, however that no one has ever really be able to define educational breadth or to prove to anyone’s satisfaction that a liberal education actually makes its recipients broad-minded. Can any education – formal education that is - make one broad-minded or does that take the experience of living? On the other hand, it can be argued that while breadth may not be easily definable, a narrow-minded, intolerant and uncritical person is not difficult to identify. Still, pinning down the origins of the attributes is challenging.

I have been suggesting all along that any subject can be taught from either a narrow or a broad perspective. Any subject can be taught in ways that bear upon the seminal task of enhancing the better human qualities and encouraging intellectual curiosity. The entire campus environment, to include the spaces in which learning and friendships occur is a source of a liberalizing education. But the problem of scale is formidable. Liberal education, even within its confusing definitions, was at least easier to incorporate in small-scale institutions where the personal ties between teacher and taught were strong. How to regain the *personal* to understand the *human* is possibly one of the greatest obstacles to realizing some of liberal education’s most important supportive factors.

The late American sociologist Burton Robert Clark took a different approach to the question of specialization. Paradoxically, he suggested that the path to breadth is actually disciplinary specialization itself.⁸ An inquiring mind moves laterally from one discipline into adjacent disciplines, much as historians will make use of all forms of inquiry that investigate the human condition as observed over time and place, or city planners will want to create urban environments that address the optimal needs of urban inhabitants.

7 I have explored the holistic ideal in my essay, “The Limbs of Osiris: Liberal Education in the English-speaking World,” in *The European and American University since 1800, Historical and Sociological Essays*, eds. Sheldon Rothblatt and Björn Wittrock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19-73.

8 Burton R. Clark, “The Problem of Complexity in Modern Higher Education,” in Rothblatt and Wittrock, *The European and American University*, 263-279.

Intellectual curiosity is the key to breadth, the desire to know, but also learning from one discipline how to ask questions of another.

The relevance of a liberal education, at least the humanities and social sciences, is also being widely challenged today because of sharp ideological and political differences in the American nation. (The same can be said of other nations.) What in contemporary America is called “diversity politics” or “critical race theory,” intellectual movements whose objective is to reveal the underlying pathologies of American history especially with regard to its minority populations of non-European extraction, have jeopardized the integrity of inherited subjects that are classified as “liberal education.” If being liberally educated means achieving balance, perspective and breadth of understanding, the culture wars of today violate the ideals of a type of education with many flaws and many lost opportunities but as a set of educational ideals, as positive and therefore necessary as the culture wars are negative and divisive.

Food for Thought

As I said at the outset of this essay, one problem with defining liberal education is establishing a viable relationship between inputs and outputs, between what is taught, what is learned, what offers perspective on human history, society and human problems and what is broadly “useful.” In the design of a liberal education, one approach is to begin with output and reason backwards, choosing subjects and approaches that are conducive to the desired outcome. The courtier ideal was successful in its day because the educational objective was clear and because privilege begets privilege. The recipients largely understood their ultimate destinations.

The immediate burden of fostering a liberal education rests on the teacher. Teaching is a craft. It is demanding, and teachers, being human, are fallible. Outside pressures and career objectives are too often at variance with the pursuit of goals that may well be under-appreciated or insufficiently rewarded. Nevertheless, unless the teacher exemplifies some of the salient ideals of a liberal education, our goal is lost. Little can then be expected of students as they search for the meaning and balance necessary to negotiate the instabilities and ambiguities that define the human experience. If a teacher can cast light on those instabilities and ambiguities, connecting bits and pieces, reuniting the limbs of Osiris with full institutional support we hope, many of the historic aims of the forms of liberal education I have identified are fulfilled.

At the very least, this recounting of problems in the history of liberal education is meant to illustrate the tortuous, tenuous yet enduring descent of liberal education from times past to a very different present and, *a fortiori*, a likely very different future. The story of Proteus and Heracles is pertinent. Hang onto the slippery object until it reveals its true nature.

I am asked what is the end of university education, and of the liberal or philosophical knowledge which I conceive it to impart: I answer, that what I have already said has been sufficient to show that it has a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself. Knowledge is capable of being its own end.

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