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### What Was Liberal Education?

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# What Was Liberal Education?

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IN OUR CURRENT historical moment, STEM disciplines, with their experimental-mathematical methods and measurable results, are central in educational practices, and humanistic education is in decline. At my own elite liberal arts college, Swarthmore, only 15 percent of the students now major in the Humanities or the Arts, and 75 percent major in Computer Science, Engineering, Biology, Economics, or Political Science. To some extent, this is natural. After all, in a difficult world like ours, why should anything as vague and unmeasurable as *cultivation* be taken seriously? Why should one learn Greek or art history or music composition, unless one just happens to enjoy such things? And why should the public or parents pay for these private enjoyments that seemingly lack significant public effect and value for the conduct of life?

Yet education is a historically evolved and evolving ensemble of practices, and it is also possible to wonder whether we might have lost our collective way. Do we really know what we're doing in turning so strikingly toward STEM and away from the humanities? And are there good reasons for this turn?

To think usefully about the current state of education, we need a proper vocabulary to describe its ideal aims, along with a rough historical sketch of how those aims have been pursued in the past. When seeking a vocabulary for describing human practices, Aristotle is always a good place to start. According to him, human beings are rational animals. They share with other animals the powers of locomotion and sensation. Aristotle puts this point by saying that human beings have both nutritive souls and locomotive-sensitive souls. Here it is

crucial that the word *soul* (*psuche*) does not name any part or component, mental or physical, of the human being. Rather, for a body to be ensouled in a certain way is simply for that body's matter to be organized in such a way that it has distinctive powers. Plants can grow and develop, so they have nutritive souls. Animals can move themselves about and sense features of their environment, so they have locomotive-sensitive souls. Human beings, distinctively, have rational souls as well; their matter is so organized that they, unlike other animals, are capable of learning language and hence of reflective reasoning, conversation, and related activities.

That human beings are complicated biological animals born with a distinctive set of rational powers seems undeniable. Other animals (dolphins, elephants, chimpanzees, dogs) have awareness of their worlds and some sophisticated powers of communication, but they do not read and write books, paint pictures, engage in religious rituals and political activity, develop and comment on cuisines. They live largely within the horizons of their instincts and not self-consciously and historically. In contrast, human beings are distinctively *interesting* animals, who possess self-consciousness and live historically, politically, and ritually, as well as having phobias, jealousies, hatreds, and revenge fantasies of a complexity unknown elsewhere in the animal world.

Human beings, then, are born with implicit or latent rational powers to be developed. Aristotle says that rational powers exist in human beings first as capacities or potentials (*dynamis*), which become actualities or explicit abilities (*energeia*) only when there is appropriate socialization and training. One can also appreciate Aristotle's point by noting that it makes perfect sense to say that I, for example, am *capable* of learning Hindi — I have the implicit capacity or potential (*dynamis*) for this — but I am not *able* to speak it: I haven't learned a word of it, and so I lack the actuality or *energeia* of Hindi-speaking.

To this descriptively plausible picture, Aristotle adds the descriptive-normative thought that it is the purpose (*telos*) or completion (*entelechia*) of any organized body that its distinctive powers (*dynamis*) be actualized. Only then can it be said to be flourishing. An acorn does not flourish unless it successfully grows into an oak tree and does what oak trees do. Likewise, a human being does not flourish unless it actualizes its rational powers appropriately. There are many ways to do this: Aristotle lists friendship, art, music, politics, philosophy, and science as among the most important ones. But a life without rational actualities is a wasted, unfortunate, or otherwise non-flourishing one. In general, well-being (*eudaimonia*) for a human being consists in activity in accordance with virtue — the actualization of rational powers in meaningful practice.

Crucially, just as is the case with learning language, the actualization of rational powers in general requires socialization, apprenticeship, training, imitation, or, more broadly, education (*paideia*). One learns how to be a flute player, citizen, scientist, historian, or philosopher, as well as how and why these things matter, *only* through interaction with others. Interaction — imitation, training, habituation — is central to human flourishing. It is for this reason that Aristotle observes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the right kind of friend — one with whom

one shares a friendship of virtue rather than a friendship of convenience (as in business dealings) or a friendship of pleasure (as in drinking buddies) — is a second self or soul. The point is that the actualization of distinctively rational powers takes place here essentially in conversation and interaction, as friends continuously talk about and practice their activities.

More broadly, human beings are enabled to flourish in and through the exercise of rational powers only through education as *paideia*: the actualization of rational powers and the direction of preference and interest toward appropriate ends. Merely having a biological life and a lot of pleasant experiences is not sufficient for living well. Absent education as *paideia*, then, human life threatens to collapse back out of the rational-cultural and into the animal-instinctual. To flourish, we must learn from each other to engage in activities that support the actualization of rational powers.

The relevant activities — again, science, politics, art, and friendship — are frequently difficult, yet they offer increasing marginal utility via self-actualization, not decreasing marginal utilities of hedonic consumption. As the philosopher-political scientist Jon Elster puts it, “Compare playing the piano to eating lamb chops.” The pleasure added by the 17th lamb chop after the 16th is small, if it exists at all; the enjoyment achieved in mastering the 17th Chopin Prelude after the 16th may be considerable. Education as *paideia* in reason-actualizing practices is here crucially all at once the formation, achievement, and enjoyment of accomplished selfhood as an actual rational agent. It is not, or not primarily, the acquisition of information aimed only at increasing the ability to control one’s environment for the sake of ease and enjoyment.

Broadly speaking, Aristotle’s conception of education was incorporated into European university life, along with Aristotle’s thought in general by way of Aquinas. The list of particular rational powers or virtues to be cultivated — already complex and multidimensional in Aristotle — was further expanded to include the distinctively Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity. This pluralized Aristotelian-Christian picture dominated European university education from the founding of its oldest universities (Bologna, 1088; Oxford, 1096; Salamanca, 1134; Paris, 1150; Cambridge, 1209; Padua, 1222) until the early 17th century. Under the impact of the new, anti-Aristotelian, anti-teleological Galilean-Cartesian physics, the most important modern scientific societies were founded in the 17th century (Academy of Sciences Leopoldina, 1652; Royal Society of London, 1660; French Academy of Sciences, 1666), and the interests and research practices of their members gradually found their way into university curricula alongside the practices of cultivation in arts and letters. The distinction between education in facts about physical nature and how to acquire them via experimentation, on the one hand, and literary-humanistic cultivation, on the other, appears in both Bacon and Descartes. The arrival of Greek scholars and hitherto unknown Greek manuscripts in the West after the Fall of Constantinople (1453) encouraged new humanistic learning in somewhat less explicitly Christian terms (Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola). Throughout the early modern period, industrial and communications technologies expanded rapidly, along with new forms of artistic practice (the Petrarchan sonnet; the

modern novel of Defoe, Fielding, and Sterne; Shakespearean drama; Monteverdian opera; equal-temperament-based systems of musical composition; and fixed-point perspective in painting). The Reformation encouraged the development of vernacular scholarship and challenged the cultural authority of Rome.

By the time of the consolidation of the modern research university (Wilhelm von Humboldt's University of Berlin, 1810), the university had become a site for both humanistic cultivation and experimental-mathematical research, as well as professional training in law and medicine. Humanistic research retained the greatest prestige and secured the most funding for its philological and archaeological projects until the latter half of the 19th century.

Meanwhile in the United States tertiary education in the earliest universities and colleges (Harvard, 1636; William and Mary, 1693; Yale, 1701; University of Pennsylvania, 1740) remained largely the province of training in the various forms of Protestant ministry, in classical languages and literatures, and in civic virtue, until the emergence of modern American research universities on the Humboldtian model (Johns Hopkins, 1876; The University of Chicago, 1890). As in Europe, over time religious education became less central, and, especially after 1900, education in the experimental natural sciences became more central. The modern social sciences did not become well established as distinct fields of study within the university until the 1930s. Wharton, the first United States business school, was established in 1881, with Haas-California and Booth-Chicago following soon after.

The modern commercial-industrial economy is now more highly differentiated and specialized than ever. Particular competences in computer science, finance, accounting, biology-medicine, engineering-physics, mathematics, or chemistry-pharmacology are required for a considerable range of high-status, high-salary positions. Competition for these positions has become increasingly fierce, first with the opening up of professional and technical positions to women in significant numbers beginning around 1970, and second with the globalization of the economy.

In addition to involving skill-based differentiation and specialization, modern work is now increasingly more scattered and less communal. A significant number of workplace interactions take place electronically rather than face to face. The design of a new automobile, of the special effects for a Hollywood blockbuster, or of an advanced cancer drug may be worked out by teams spread across three or four continents, with very few team members meeting one another in person. It is not unusual for contemporary scientific research papers in the natural sciences to have 50 or two hundred co-authors. Major decisions about the investment of capital may be made by department heads and corporate board members from multiple locations, with little sense of their sharing any local identity with more immediately technical and manual laborers. What can be contracted out efficiently to a cheaper labor source will be.

Contemporary university education has largely accepted this situation. The funding and continuing life of the university depend on the willingness of parents and taxpayers to support it. These constituencies increasingly demand job training, for understandable enough reasons. And so we have the culture of outcomes assessment to establish the production in students of discrete, certifiable, marketable skills, and, in general, the collapse of *paideia*.

None of this is likely to change any time soon. The forces and structures in place — institutional, psychological, economic, and cultural — are too powerful. As Marcia Angell poignantly described the situation in a recent *New York Review of Books* article, parents nowadays, and especially upper middle-class parents, are increasingly dominated by a natural fear [...] for their children in an increasingly precarious and unequal world. [...] Children, then, are the good news and the bad news. For most of us they enrich our lives beyond measure. I would have done almost anything for my children, and they feel the same way about theirs. But children are also the problem. They are so precious that their parents concentrate on them to the exclusion of nearly everything else and feel justified in doing so. That seems to be what citizenship now means: every family for itself.

Angell expresses a hope that parents might learn to take a broader view and come to see that the lives of their children are bound up with the lives of those around them, including those of radically different means. Sooner or later, one might think, people will come to understand that day-care workers and lawyers, hedge-fund managers and convenience store employees, Walmart shelf-stockers and neurosurgeons depend upon one another. Rightly, however, Angell is not optimistic: it is all too easy to deny and disguise these dependencies by leading the great bulk of one's life in an income-segregated neighborhood, and in any case the resource demands for the competitive credentialization of one's children remain pressing.

What has really happened, since the advent of modern industrial-technical economies and despite their manifold, massive contributions to human productivity, health, and welfare, is the collapse of a form of social life in which *paideia* was relevant. As Charles Taylor puts it, elaborating a thought of Hegel's, we have come to live within a form of individualism in which norms as expressed in public practices cease to hold our allegiance. They are either seen as irrelevant or decried as usurpation. [...] The individual ceases to define his identity principally by the public experience of the society. On the contrary, the most meaningful experience, which seems to him most vital, to touch most the core of his being, is private. Public experience seems to him secondary, narrow, and parochial, merely touching a part of himself. Should that experience try to make good its claim to centrality as before, the individual enters into conflict with it and has to fight it.

Individual experience and its private satisfactions are all. The public world is a sham and an imposition. Enjoyment of rational activity in occupying a well-defined social role is a fool's errand. It is no wonder that the favorite philosopher among Swarthmore students (if they take any interest in philosophy at all) is Nietzsche, with his escapist vitalism. Nor is it surprising that in a recent class of mine in the philosophy of music the entire class argued for the significance of electronic dance music, house music, raves, ambient music, and, broadly speaking, music as a Nietzschean-Dionysian escape from the otherwise pressing pains and burdens of public identity.

Since we do live in a fragmented, radically unequal, and highly competitive world in which care for one's own, not for public life as it stands, must matter, it is hard to blame students for concerning themselves with technical-instrumental education and credentialization. And, of course, we should recognize that many of the forms of public identity that were historically on offer and forced upon members of groups were oppressive for many: the happy homemaker; the compliant, cheerful "good" Black Man; the itinerant farm worker; and so on. But there are costs, too, in losing a sense of the significance of rational, cooperative, public activity within a shared social world. As Taylor goes on to remark,

increasing alienation in a society which has eroded its traditional foci of allegiance makes it harder and harder to achieve the basic consensus, to bring everyone to the "general will," which is essential for radical democracy. As the traditional limits fade with the grounds for accepting them, society tends to fragment, partial groups become increasingly truculent in their demands, as they see less reason to compromise with the "system."

In my own teaching that aims at addressing this situation and at recovering the significance of *paideia*, I have relied on examples, especially on works of art. If I can get students to pay attention — close attention — to the details and intricate coherences of, say, François Truffaut's *Day for Night* or Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* or James Baldwin's *Another Country*, Friedrich Hölderlin's "Half of Life" or Rilke's "An Archaic Torso of Apollo," Plato's *Symposium* or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, then, I think to myself, that's something. There's a chance that they will resonate to the insights and, more important, the powers of perception infused with thought that are manifest in these works. They might learn to see their lives, their social circumstances, and the currently obscure possibilities within them more clearly and with more hope. That would be something, and I am not quite ready to give up.

But I worry, too, about Swarthmore's submission to the demands of credentialization, its implicit acceptance of the thought that its primary mission is to train students for the workplace by producing measurable skills. Like its competitor institutions, Swarthmore is also concerned with providing students a pleasant experience during their college years, both in order to attract students and to secure support from nostalgic alumni: hence the ever-increasing investment in resort-function facilities and in "the student experience." And the

college is committed to social justice by its largely sentimentalist lights: every individual should enjoy self-esteem and the respect of others within a racially, religiously, ethnically, and sexually diverse society. Absent education as *paideia* and confrontation with market forces that undermine it, however, this emphasis on diversity and felt respect often produces only a veneer of politeness on the part of docile workers who remain primarily concerned with private satisfactions.

Sometimes a commitment to the priority of credentialization surfaces explicitly. In a 2014 faculty debate on the college's mission statement, faculty members from all three divisions criticized the notion that the college should aim to teach virtues such as courage, a sense of justice, a feel for beauty, and perseverance on the ground that there are no discrete, objective tests for possessing these things. Indeed, there are not, but to abandon the cultivation of virtues and instead to teach only in order to produce measurable outcomes is to capitulate to an individualist culture of instrumental control and private satisfactions.

In any case, I will carry on, with such modest successes in *paideia* as I am able to manage. Within a general culture that no longer expects or appreciates *paideia* and within an institution that is shaped by that general culture, this will sadly remain difficult and often-enough fruitless work. The larger issue is the plight of liberal education, *paideia*, in an ongoing war between Deweyan-Rawlsian liberal democracy and neoliberalism, where neoliberalism is winning.

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