

Redefining Liberal Education

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IT IS OFTEN assumed that liberal education should be broad, permissive and unprejudiced. I believe this assumption to be what I have described as an intellectual superstition. I suggest that liberal education ought to be integral, committed and biased.

I have used the word biased deliberately as the opposite of what I call the cult of suspended judgment. That cult argues that before acting, before taking a position, before accepting a theory we must wait patiently until all the evidence is in. It argues that religious faith must be foresworn, that love must either be denied or sentimentalized, that ethical commitment must be suspended and that the affirmation of intellectual certainty must be postponed until the weight of evidence becomes so crushing that we cannot conceive of alternative action. That is called keeping an open mind.

Of course, neither life nor education waits until all the evidence is in. Judgments must be made on the basis of partial evidence and action must be taken when knowledge is incomplete. St. Paul wrote:

What we see now is like the dim image in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. What I know now is only partial; then it will be complete, as complete as God's knowledge of me. (1 Corinth. 12-13.)

We must begin our education as we begin all other things with an act of faith. Without a reasoned faith which takes into account all the imperfect evidence, we shall be thrown back on passion and sentimentality, on the senseless reflexes of unbelief and on action based upon conformity to the popular mood of the moment. We may suspend belief but we cannot suspend action.

William James, in his essay, *The Will to Believe* asks:

Are there not somewhere forced options in our speculative questions, and can we (as men who may be interested at least as much in positively gaining truth as in merely escaping dupery) always wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived? It seems *a priori* improbable that the truth should be so

nicely adjusted to our needs and powers as that. In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean. Indeed, we should view them with scientific suspicion if they did.

Then James goes on to argue something very important to the whole question of education. He says:

There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*, that would be an insane logic which would say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the "lowest kind of immorality" into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives!

Now, of course, William James did not mean that thinking or wishing will make anything so. He did mean that without an Archimedian point of faith no man is able to get a prize on the heavy lump of reality. In science and in morals there must be a primary assumption about the orderliness of things before we can go on to any more precise knowledge of reality. In politics there must be some basic belief that man is one thing and not another and that he find fulfillment only in certain social modes before we can discuss intelligently those things which constitute a proper political order. In aesthetics there must be some essential apprehension of the beautiful in its general and nonparticular sense before we are capable of either the creative or the critical aesthetic experience.

These assumptions, this bias, these acts of faith are not, however, simply a human protest against the absurd, a trick that all life has learned and which has given it a temporary evolutionary advantage. The assumption we make that the basic reality of

the universe is orderly, is good, is beautiful is so inherently a part of our very existence that to deny it is to dehumanize ourselves.

Liberal education begins with the assumption of order and goodness and beauty. Indeed there can be no meaningful exploration of "the pursuits and activities proper to mankind" unless such assumptions are made. Nor is it my purpose to deny that there is disorder, sin and ugliness in the world. They are the all too common experience of mankind. The contemporary habit of dealing only with the depraved, the misshapen, the vile, the sick and the anarchic leaves off the examination of the evidence at the very point where it has the possibility of meaning.

There is some puzzle as to why this should be the case but nonetheless as Edmund Fuller has observed in *Man in Modern Fiction*:

It is our weakness that when we discover bad in good we are much more apt to generalize sweepingly about it than when we discover good in bad. It is easier to hate than to love, easier to reject than accept. . . . Truly to understand a man who is sick you must understand a man who is well. I believe that the loss of the understanding of the full nature of man is itself a major source of sickness.

Education is today everywhere dominated by a positivistic philosophy which refuses to raise those embarrassing questions which would result in a discussion of values. But behind this retreat from ultimate concerns and questions of value lies the refusal to make an act of faith which accords with such evidence as we now possess. Behind the flight from value lies the cult of suspended judgment.

Edmund Fuller, (and I recommend his book, *Man in Modern Fiction*, very highly) puts the problem very aptly when he says:

What some writers have lost is not an external framework of values, not just this or that set of value concepts. They have lost the basic vision of their own kind. They not only do not know *who* they are, which is problem enough; they also do not know *what* they are—and that is the ultimate tragedy: for man not to know the nature of man . . .

Liberal education is biased because man's deepest instincts and his commonest experiences are biased. That bias is entrenched in the belief that creation is orderly, is good and is beautiful. These assumptions are the necessary preconditions of any education.

The function of education is not only the discovery and study of the pursuits and activities proper to mankind; it is the integration of those pursuits and activities into one harmonious whole. Education must be integral if it is to be successful.

Our partial truths cry out for completeness, our experiences need the confirmation and affirmation which derives from the experiences of others. Truth is always catholic, error always sectarian and subjectivistic. Consequently, community is always an essential context for the discovery and the communication of truth.

Because this is the case, we must, if we take the question of liberal education seriously, see that our colleges and universities are genuine communities and not simply congeries of buildings, students and professors. They must be communities which provide an easy and comfortable atmosphere where students and professors not only are able to, but do, talk together, debate and enjoy one another. Such community will be impossible unless the students and faculty share some common value and dedicate themselves to the pursuit of some common good. Aristotle begins his *Politics* by saying that "every community is established with a view to some good; for mankind,"

he tells us, "always act in order to obtain that which they think good." Now, the individual goods of learning alone are never enough to sustain community and unless the institution and its members give themselves to some larger common purpose community will fail. It is never enough for colleges to point to their success in preparing students for graduate school or for a particular vocation. The purpose of community must go beyond these narrow and particular limits. One of the most important difficulties in institutions of higher education in our contemporary society is the pervasive loss of institutional identity and institutional goals. What exactly does the college community think good? What do students believe to be worth pursuing, now and hereafter?

Moreover, the college community can never pursue the goals of liberal education effectively unless and until there is genuine debate and difference represented in the faculty and in the student body. We discern truth, as a general rule and we elaborate its aspects through a dialectical process. Those who close off debate, who limit the views represented or discussed, whatever their motives, do a grave disservice to the educational process. One thing only is necessary and that is that honesty and integrity be evidenced by all the participants in the debate. If ideology or passion, or self-interest or animus of any kind displaces the honest pursuit of the truth then debate will become little more than a facade for indoctrination. That is why it is so extraordinarily difficult to talk intelligently with members of either the extreme Left or the extreme Right.

Under present circumstances debate will not easily and naturally occur. For more than a generation both form and opinion in the intellectual lives of our colleges and universities have tended toward a deadening sameness. Our faculties have been too

regardful of the current orthodoxies; too preoccupied with conformity to the contemporary styles of thought and patterns of behavior. Ideally college faculties should present a variety of styles and viewpoints.

Community and diversity, then, are both important elements in the achievement of an integral education. There is, however, a still more important way in which integration ought to take place in the course of a liberal education.

That integration of the content of liberal education goes beyond the identification of one commanding subject matter which then reigns as the queen of the sciences. That was Newman's dream when he sought to elevate theology to that commanding position as focal point of all the lesser disciplines. Before theology that position had been occupied by the classics, and in the late nineteenth century, Newman's dream having proved a failure, the study of history became the great integrative force in liberal education. It seems to me clear that integration at the level of subject matter is inadequate and always proves itself to be inadequate.

There are, however, at the deepest levels of our human experience integrative forces at work which liberal education ought to uncover and encourage. Integration can never be achieved at the purely mechanical level but must reflect the way, in fact, things really are. What do I mean by this statement?

Plato, writing in the dialogue *Charmides*, lets Socrates state the problem in the following fashion:

Here, then, I said my own dream: Whether coming through the horn or the ivory gate, I cannot tell. The dream is this: Let us suppose that wisdom is such as we are now defining, and that she has absolute sway over us; then each action will be done according to the arts and sciences, and no one professing to be a

pilot when he is not, or any physician or general, or anyone else pretending to know matters of which he is ignorant, will deceive or elude us; our health will be improved; our safety at sea, and also in battle, will be assured; our coats and shoes, and all other instruments and implements will be skillfully made, because the workmen will be good and true. Aye, and if you please, you may suppose that prophecy, which is the knowledge of the future, will be under the control of wisdom, and that she will deter deceiters and set up the true prophets in their place as the revealers of the future. Now I quite agree that mankind, thus provided, would live and act according to knowledge, for wisdom would watch and prevent ignorance from intruding on us. But whether by acting according to knowledge we shall act well and be happy, my dear Critias,—this is a point which we have not yet been able to determine.

Suppose Socrates is saying we have all the technical powers the cultivation of the individual disciplines can give us; will these, even if they include the science of futurology, add up to human happiness? Must they not be related to one another and harmonized to some other kinds of knowledge; which relationships and knowledge will provide the key to happiness, to order in the human soul and to harmony both interior and exterior?

Having stated the problem in Platonic terms let us go on to develop the problem within a context of Platonic ideas. It would be possible to explore the problem outside such a context but one of the most valuable aspects of the classics is that they have provided us with a widely understood vocabulary which shortens the road by which we come to engagement with humanistic issues.

To use the Platonic formulation the science is "the science of human advantage,"

the "science of the good." "The good" here is not to be understood as a particular good but rather as the fulfillment of our human natures; the total realization of our human capacities. The achievement of this good, as Socrates argued, was a process of integration, of harmonization of aspects of knowledge and potencies within the personality in such a fashion that the ultimate purposes of human existence are realized.

Let us be more specific. For Plato truth in a scientific sense, goodness in its ethical aspect, and beauty as aesthetic function, are all interdependent and aspects of a higher and more inclusive good. Let us consider the consequences which follow from the break-up of the unity of the true, the good and the beautiful. It is of course altogether proper that science be divorced in some of its aspects from ethics. The study of all things begins with a consideration of the thing in and for itself but it must proceed, if it is to be understood in its ultimate aspect to its relationship to the ordered cosmos. When the link between particular truth and ethical consequence is broken, for example, the result is always menacing and destructive. Reason alone, untempered by love and unsanctified by beauty is a terrible thing. The world is filled with the partial logic of science, with the inhumanity of systems. Nor is beauty alone enough. We live in a time when beauty has been divorced from the good; when the ethical dimension of art has been abandoned and the truth which art should represent is despised. Beauty alone as a formal aesthetic is either a sterile pastime or the seedbed of monstrosity. Even the ethically good, the principle of justice when it is devoid of truth and beauty, slips over into fanaticism and sentimentality. Once the connecting links are broken which bind together the aptitudes of the soul, the possibility of harmony in the life of the indi-

vidual and in the life of the society must be abandoned. We need integral educations because we need whole men and we need whole men not simply for the sake of society but because individual men can fulfill themselves only through wholeness.

Any discussion of fulfillment brings with it, as a necessary aspect of fulfillment, the role of pleasure. Perhaps liberal education ought to concern itself more with the relationship of pleasure to the good and harmonious life. Certainly there is a major problem in the way in which contemporary man has dealt with all the aspects of pleasure. Had some genius followed Bentham's argument and devised a calculus of pleasure there is no doubt that he would discover that by 1972 a fantastic inflation in pleasure had taken place but as is the case with all inflations more and more buys less and less. Moreover he would note, (though it would be difficult for a Benthamite to make such an admission) that base pleasures have quite generally driven noble pleasures out of circulation. And he might, because there is a relationship between pleasure and happiness, inquire how it happens that increasing pleasure has not brought with it increasing happiness.

Pleasure is the compliment nature pays to right action and although the views of nature are nearly always short run and although nature is frequently deceived nonetheless, pleasure in all its aspects always points beyond the temporal to the joy of transcendent harmony. How then has it happened that we modern men and especially we Christians have permitted pleasure to fall to such low estate, have abandoned it to the voluptuary and the barbarian and have held it to be unworthy of the best and noblest? Why do we say, with contempt, that "he" or "she" is a "pleasure seeker" when pleasure seeking forms such an important part of all human behavior.

Does, indeed, liberal education have anything to do with what I would like to call the rehabilitation or the redemption of pleasure?

Lionel Trilling, a decade ago, wrote an important and intensely interesting essay which he called "The Fate of Pleasure: Wordsworth to Dostoyevsky." In his essay Trilling comments at length on the rebellion against the pleasant which takes place in nineteenth century literature. By the end of the century, while pleasure had not disappeared from art and literature completely it had been largely displaced by the ugly, the sick and the monstrous. By the 70's of our own century matters have worsened and the decline of pleasure is now quite complete. Artists and intellectuals have increasingly turned from the themes of harmony, well-being and sense satisfaction. No doubt they were in part in honest rebellion against a dishonest and sentimental art which permitted men to take a pleasure or have an emotion for which they had not actually paid the price. For this they must be praised.

But there were other and more important sources for the rebellion against pleasure. One of them was the feeling that pleasure was unworthy of that which was highest and best in man. Pleasure is a consequence of our creaturely natures. It is a part of our physiology and an aspect of that subtle mingling of chemistry and spirit, of necessity and freedom which is human nature. However, by the end of the nineteenth century Western intellectuals were in rebellion against creatureliness, in rebellion against the conditions imposed on humanity by their nature. There is a universal desire on the part of Western intellectuals to become as Gods and they perceived the most important aspect of God to be an absolute and unconditioned freedom. The quest for absolute and unconditioned freedom is the key to the rejection of pleasure or the perver-

sion of pleasure in such a way that nature is forced to pay her compliment of joy to an action which thwarts and turns away from nature's purpose.

Trilling puts the position of modern man well when he writes:

... To know and feel and live and move at the behest of the principle of pleasure —this, for [Dostoyevsky's] Underground Man, so far from constituting his native and naked dignity, constitutes his humiliation in bondage. It makes him, he believes, a mechanic thing, the puppet of whoever or whatever can offer him the means of pleasure. If pleasure is indeed the principle of his being, he is as known as the sum of 2 and 2; he is a mere object of reason, of that rationality of the Revolution which is established upon the primacy of the principle of pleasure.

In spite of the rebellion of the intellectuals the quest for pleasure is a fact of our humanity. We will have pleasure; if we do not find it in the natural fulfillment of our humanity we will seek it in the chemical and unnatural. If we are cut off from those noble joys we will seek our satisfactions in the base and the degraded. Our natures will not let us give an absolute "no" to our desires.

Note something very interesting. By the end of the nineteenth century, intellectuals had turned away from pleasure or had inverted pleasure in such a way as to cheat nature, to short-change necessity. That of course did not mean that pleasure disappeared. Indeed, what happened is that the intellectuals had abandoned pleasure to the lowest and most unschooled in the society. Pleasure ceased to be ennobled and uplifted by art and grace; ceased to point unmistakably beyond itself to the transcendent harmony and sank down to the lowest common denominator. It became a commodity and was commercialized. It was brutalized and

barbarized, and beauty and harmony were expunged from its forms.

Liberal education can and must begin the rehabilitation of pleasure. It may be that the problem of pleasure is the most important problem in contemporary society. How can liberal education achieve this rehabilitation, this redemption of pleasure?

In the first place liberal education can go a long way toward reestablishing an adequate definition of what it means to be human. It can help us to establish the dimensions of our creatureliness and the futility of rebellion against the constitution of our natures. It can warn us against the demands commonly made for an absolute and unconditioned freedom and it can help us to discover how those natures are best satisfied and best fulfilled. It can, in short, help us to understand the preconditions of joy and pleasure and the consequences of their perversion.

Secondly, the arts themselves, however

inadequately and partially they are reflected in our individual disciplines provide us with models of those noble joys that always arise in order perfected and harmony attained.

We have all been, now, a season in hell. Let us join Dante where at the end of the *Inferno* he and Vergil, the very figure of the liberal arts, return to an earth where right order rather than hell's inverted order reigns.

By that hidden way
My guide and I did enter, to return
To the fair world: and heedless of
repose
We climb'd, he first, I following his
steps,
Till on our view the beautiful lights of
heaven
Dawn'd through a circular opening in
the cave:
Thence issuing we again beheld the
stars.