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**The Urgent Need for Liberal Education in Today’s Troubled World**

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We live in a time of deep political divisions and intolerance. Moreover, both at home and abroad religious fanaticism confronts us (whatever “side” we are on).[[1]](#footnote-1) While many say we live in a “scientific” age, there are many (again, both at home and abroad) who believe scientists and their “theories” are egregiously promoting hoaxes on a too-gullible public.[[2]](#footnote-2) While we live in an “information age” where the best available information known to human beings is readily available to a far-greater portion of humanity than ever before, it seems that fewer and fewer are able to separate the wheat from the chaff; and many confuse “popular sources” and “talking points” with authoritative information sources.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Within our cultural tradition proponents of liberal education have held it to be the preferred strategy for addressing such challenges. Today, however, the very idea of a liberal education[[4]](#footnote-4) is under attack from multiple sides (again, both at home and abroad).[[5]](#footnote-5) Relativists claim it lacks tolerance for diversity and difference, while theologically-minded individuals claim it promotes atheism and destroys fundamental enduring values. Differing individuals and groups claim it is useless, too expensive, that it is really indoctrination, or that it should be replaced by “education for the workplace.” Some, of course, just don’t understand what a liberal education is, and thus they can not see it as even potentially valuable or important.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The challenges to liberal education arise both from outside higher education and from within it. Clearly the cost-benefit criticisms engender internal calls for reallocation of resources, and the push for education for the workplace often finds a receptive audience in the professional schools. In his *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance In The Internet Age,* Lee McIntirediscusses contemporary misunderstandings of the scientific methodology and misinterpretations of evolving understandings of our cognitive processes contending that:

it is regrettable that we as individuals suffer from cognitive irrationalities that prevent us from finding or recognizing the truth. It is deplorable that so many ideologues choose to exploit this weakness by lying about the truth in their own self-interest. Yet it is almost criminal that so many in the media and academics…have done so little to counter those weaknesses and lies by standing up for truth. It is one thing to overlook the truth. It is worse to obfuscate it. But almost as bad is to remain complicit when those methods that lead to truth are being attacked. Science may not be perfect, but it is arguably the best method that we have for the discovery of truth.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Indeed both within the society at large, and within the academy, the misunderstanding of scientific methodology, has developed into a nascent relativism in society at large (engendering the confusion of talking points and social media posts with facts), and a full-blown relativism in parts of the academy which denies any connection of “theory” with facts and any “privileging” of one theory over any other.

Since I believe a liberally educated citizenry can best address the political divisions, help overcome the religious intolerance, assist in separating the signal from the noise, promote tolerance for differing conceptions of the good life, and prepare individuals for both an evolving information economy and for democratic citizenship, I believe it is important that we promote an understanding of what such an education is and of its importance today. To make this case, I first need to quickly clarify what such an education is like.[[8]](#footnote-8)

A liberal education should transform the student.[[9]](#footnote-9) As Brand Blanshard said, “to educate a human mind is not merely to add something to it. It is to transform it at a vital point, the point where its secret ends reside.”[[10]](#footnote-10) What is central to such an education is not that the student comes to acquire specific bits of information (certain basic units of cultural literacy, for example), but rather that *a habit of reasonableness* (often referred to as “critical thinking”) becomes inculcated. According to Harvey Siegel, such an individual is “appropriately motivated by reasons: she has a propensity or disposition to *believe and act* in accordance with reasons; and she has the ability properly to assess the force of reasons in the many contexts in which reasons play a role.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Reasonable individuals must not simply *understand* how to critically assess a position, they must be *moved by reason.*

As the Lawrence University *Catalog* once stated: “open and free inquiry, a devotion to excellence, the development of character, the mastery of competencies, the ability to think critically, the excitement and rewards of learning—these are the aims and principles of a liberal arts education.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This sort of education can not promise to produce happiness; indeed both Plato and J.S. Mill contend that even were it to produce dissatisfaction, the sort of life it engenders is preferable to the life of a “contented pig” which does not pursue these ends. As Blanshard says:

...Socrates’ life was better because, whether more pleasant or not, it involved a completer fulfillment of powers. Grant the pig as generous a gastronomic capacity as one wishes, still one must admit that its intellectual, moral, and aesthetic horizons are limited, while those of Socrates are all but unlimited. What gave Socrates’ life its value was the free play of a magnificent mind, the fulfillment in thought, feeling, and practice of a great intellect and a great heart.[[13]](#footnote-13)

While many have been proponents of “the examined life,” holding it to be the *sole* good life for *all* human beings, I believe that a truly democratic society will allow that there are *numerous distinct conceptions of the good life,* and *many intrinsic values,* while also believing there need not be a single hierarchy which orders them. That is, there is much to recommend John Dewey’s criticism that while there may be much to praise in Plato’s “ideal state,” even if it did indeed ultimately provide for the best possible society and individual:

humanity cannot be content with a good which is procured from without, however high and otherwise complete that good. The aristocratic idea implies that the mass of men are to be inserted by wisdom, or if necessary, thrust by force, into their proper positions in the social organism….[W]hen an individual has found that place in society for which he is best fitted and is exercising the function proper to that place, he has obtained his completest development, but…the truth omitted by aristocracy, [and] emphasized by democracy…[is] that he must find this place and assume this work in the main for himself.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Martha Nussbaum contends that the classical view of a liberally-educated “world citizen” emphasizes three “capacities:”

…the capacity for critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions….[[15]](#footnote-15)

…an ability to see themselves not simply as citizens of some local region or group but also, and above all, as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.[[16]](#footnote-16)

and

…narrative imagination….the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of the person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.[[17]](#footnote-17)

I see these three capacities not as a three-legged stool, but as an elaboration of the core unified character Siegel characterizes as someone with “…a propensity or disposition to *believe and act* in accordance with reasons; and…the ability properly to assess the force of reasons in the many contexts in which reasons play a role.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The capacity to be motivated by reason is not a capacity of an isolated individual, but, rather, of someone who is concerned with the intersubjective activity of subjecting her beliefs, emotions, wishes, and desires to critical scrutiny. This activity requires that one see oneself as bound to others who also adopt this stance, but who may not share the same beliefs, desires, emotions, wishes, *etc*.

Nussbaum notes that to foster a democracy that is reflective and deliberative we must promote students whose “Socratic ignorance” of both their own and of other cultures ensures they will not take platitudes and claims about either at face-value. Instead they will approach both:

…with good intellectual equipment for the further pursuit of understanding. These traits, so important in a citizen of today’s interdependent world, are very unlikely to be developed by personal experience alone. At present we are not doing well enough at the task of understanding, and these failures are damaging our nation—in business, in politics, in urgent deliberations about the environment and agriculture and human rights. We must, and we can, cultivate understanding through a liberal education; and an education will not be truly “liberal” (producing truly free and self-governing citizens) unless it undertakes this challenge.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Of course, where questions regarding ends are addressed in a context where it is *not* presupposed that there are single answers applicable to all, the critical and reasonable capacities enhanced by a liberal education become *all the more important*. For it is only by critically and reasonably examining various differing conceptions that individuals will be able to assess properly their own, make informed choices, and develop a tolerance for others’ choices of ends. Amy Gutmann discusses the importance of allowing for a diversity of ends for democracy maintaining that “democratic education” should:

…help students understand the merits (and limits) of tolerating competing conceptions of the good life, and thereby respecting the rights of all individuals to pursue their conception of the good life to the extent that these conceptions are consistent with respecting the equal rights of other individuals. Agreeing to disagree about conceptions of the good life is essential to securing the basic liberty of all individuals. Religious differences have long been among the most salient cultural differences in democratic societies. Deliberative democracy is committed to protecting religious freedom along with other basic liberties, such as freedom of speech. On matters of basic liberty, a democratic education teaches toleration of cultural differences on grounds of reciprocity: mutual respect for the personal integrity of all persons.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Fostering such “reasonable individuals” is not a simple process. They *may* arise without attending a college or university—indeed both Socrates and J.S. Mill leap to mind as examples here. Moreover (and unfortunately) colleges and universities do not always foster either reasonableness or critical thinking. Indeed, all too frequently American colleges and universities praise the ideal of a liberal education but go about their business without any serious efforts to instantiate that ideal. It is the ideal of a research university which often dominates the American higher educational scene. Such institutions claim that they dedicate themselves to research, teaching, and service, but they truly devote themselves to transmitting, extending, and publishing specialized domains of human knowledge, values, and culture. In such educational institutions undergraduate education is seen as preparatory—its aim to produce individuals who are capable of pursuing graduate work in one of the specialized scientific, scholarly, creative, or professional fields. This is a noble goal, but it should not be the central goal of undergraduate education. Students can become skilled in the methodologies, doctrines, and values of a particular field or profession without becoming critical thinkers or reasonable individuals.

Of course extensive training in a particular science, scholarly, creative, or professional field, *can* generate individuals who are excellent critical thinkers—indeed John Dewey thought that critical thinking could be best fostered while pursuing particular scientific, professional, or practical problems. The hallmark of a liberal education, however, is not training for a particular field; instead a liberal education trains one for *life*. Individuals frequently find that they need, or want, to change professions as their lives progress, and even where one is lucky enough to find a fulfilling life path and pursue it from the start, there is *more* to life than one’s professional endeavors.

In the ideal case liberally educated individuals approach *all* their cognitive, axiological, professional, and practical undertakings as reasonable individuals. Thus, as Siegel notes, “when we take it upon ourselves to educate students so as to foster critical thinking, we are committing ourselves to nothing less than the development of a certain sort of person.”[[21]](#footnote-21) A liberal education is a challenge because the student must learn to make considered choices if she is to acquire the traits noted above. One can not “learn how to learn” without acting and critically observing the consequences of these actions—one must learn by doing, and such learning is a function of choice and self-discipline. A liberally educated individual asks “Why” rather than “What,” and proceeds to critically consider the various proposed responses. Such critical abilities are not easily developed and the challenge posed by a liberal education is that of choosing to become a critical thinker—of choosing to accept the responsibility, discipline, and effort which this involves.

While an individual may impose such a responsibility upon herself without ever attending a college or university, the enterprise of becoming such an individual is sufficiently difficult that most are aided by becoming part of a community which can foster and instantiate such a life. The college or university which would educate reasonable individuals who are critical thinkers must foster diversity, skepticism, and debate. This is not important because diversity, skepticism, and debate are themselves worthwhile—a diverse society of skeptical debaters might be a woefully uncritical community. These traits are important because a liberal education requires an intellectual community wherein individuals can cooperatively, collegially, and responsibly explore, debate, and consider the problems of this and other ages (and of this and other cultures)—here we see the connections between the three capacities Nussbaum mentions.

A college or university seeking to promote reasonableness must seek to develop critical thinkers who do not simply limit their critical activities to one specialized problem or area of human concern. A liberal education does this by promoting a community which values both specialized and general knowledge. The liberally educated individual thinks critically, writes clearly, and speaks effectively whether considering mathematical problem, a scientific theory, a political argument, or a musical composition. By being exposed to a wide range of subject matters while also focusing her attention on a single area of knowledge, the liberally educated individual acquires the ability to respond to the unforeseen and unexpected—her education enables her to make considered judgments, and to treat ideas (whether her own or others’) critically, reflectively, and reasonably.

If such an education is to be possible, the educational community itself must be committed to this ideal and it must provide models of critical thinking which the undergraduate student may observe and emulate. For this reason, teaching in such a community takes time and effort. Such teachers must adopt Israel Scheffler’s model of teaching which holds that:

to teach...is at some points at least to submit oneself to the understanding and independent judgment of the pupil, to his demand for reasons, to his sense of what constitutes an adequate explanation. To teach someone that such and such is the case is not merely to try to get him to believe it: deception, for example, is not a method or a mode of teaching. Teaching involves further that, if we try to get the student to believe that such and such is the case, we try also to get him to believe it for the reasons that, within the limits of his capacity to gasp, are *our* reasons.

Teaching, in this way, requires us to reveal our reasons to the student and, by so doing, to submit them to his evaluation and criticism....To teach is thus...to acknowledge the “reason” of the pupil, i.e., his demand for and judgment of reasons.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Oftentimes people believe that a liberal education is not “useful”—it requires that one study fields, acquire information, and understand methodologies which one may never employ in one’s professional life. This criticism is very wide of the mark however. Reasonable individuals will be most able to deal successfully with the complex problems and challenges which arise for today’s workforce. Moreover, such an education is *essential* for sustaining a democracy. Where the citizens are not critical thinkers, it is all too easy for their thought, actions, and values to be manipulated by others. A true democracy requires that the citizens *themselves* critically assess both the means and the ends which society is to foster and pursue. Plato favors the rule of the state by philosopher kings because he believes that the ship of state must be directed by a skilled “navigator” who has a special kind of knowledge. As Dewey noted, Plato’s ship of state metaphor flounders when it is recognized that navigators do not generally choose this ship’s destination—the members of the crew of the ship of state are not simply hired hands. They *are* the state, and they are vitally interested in the choice of a destination as well as the course selected to attain the destination.[[23]](#footnote-23) If they are not critical thinkers, however, their preferences may result from manipulation rather than rational contemplation, and their fate may not be greatly different from that of satisfied pigs.

To attempt to justify liberal education by appealing to our nature as rational animals, the “higher pleasures,” the possibility of “moral self-sufficiency,” or the prerequisites for “democracy” does not end the justificatory responsibility which arises here. Someone may well ask what justifies *these* ends—asking “What assures you that humans are rational,” “What justifies the stated preference for democracy,” or “Why should we seek to become moral, autonomous, or self-sufficient?” Such questions lead to lengthy philosophical debates, but I will not pursue these issues here.[[24]](#footnote-24) I do not presume that everyone shares these ends—the fideist, skeptic, egoist, and fascist will certainly have reservations which I can not meet here without going too far afield.

I will, however, appeal to Winston Churchill’s justification of democracy since it offers a point worth noting in regard to such extended debates. Churchill notes that:

many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time; but there is the broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.[[25]](#footnote-25)

I think that Churchill’s justification of democracy may apply quite well to the justification of a liberal education in our current context. While such an education is not perfect, given the expectations we have, it is not clear that there are any truly viable alternatives. While there are other educational models, they do not facilitate the ends we actually need to achieve to sustain our democracy, provide for individual autonomy, and ensure the sorts of adaptive and reasonable personnel our society and economy need to flourish. Unfortunately, a liberal education is something one must actually work at—the challenge of accepting the responsibility to become a critical thinker and a reasonable individual is a difficult challenge to accept when one is a member of a passive consumer society.

A liberal education is a privilege because it is not the educational norm within our larger community—relatively few citizens actually receive such an education (although such an education is, truly speaking, something all citizens *should* receive). Those who receive such an education become not only personally empowered, but they also have a civic responsibility. The American “founding fathers” clearly believed, and acted, upon this—and Adams and Jefferson did much to mandate and facilitate the liberal education of the populous. As their example shows, liberally educated individuals have the ability to improve society and better the lot of all citizens.

Liberally educated individuals who do not direct at least some of their energies in an effort to improve their society act irresponsibly and betray the fact that they have acquired but the veneer of a liberal education. Socrates and J.S. Mill were social activists—neither pursued the higher pleasures simply to make himself exceedingly happy. Each believed that their happiness was intimately tied to the happiness of others, and each worked selflessly to help others improve their lot. While their examples may be hard acts to follow, liberally educated individuals find that the privilege of empowerment carries the responsibility of social commitment.

In the truest sense, a liberal education *is* vocational—it prepares individuals for lives as responsible and critical agents and citizens. It equips them with the skills requisite to master new vocations rather than limiting them to a single niche in a continuously evolving world, and it equips them with the tools necessary to help sustain our democratic institutions. While it has been valued and valuable throughout our cultural history, I hope I have made some headway toward showing that the challenges we confront make it *urgently necessary* for today’s society.

1. *Cf*., Craig Biddle, “Islamic Jihad and Western Faith,” *The Objective Standard* v. 10 (Spring 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An interesting source which questions our “scientific” presumptions while also addressing religious differences is: Gerardus Bouw, “Why Geocentricity?”, <http://www.geocentricity.com/geocentricity/whygeo.html>, last modified May 7, 2001, and accessed on June 3, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Cf*., Lee McIntyre, *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance in The Internet Age* (N.Y.: Routledge, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. It should be clear that ‘liberal’ here refers not to current the current political distinction between liberals and conservatives, but, rather, the “etymological roots of the word “liberal,” used in regard to education, are found in the Latin *liberals*, an adjective applied for centuries to various words regarding education: *disciplinae liberals, studia liberalia, doctrinae liberals, litterae liberals*, an, especially, *artes liberals*. These terms abound in writings from the Renaissance, from the late Middle Ages, and on back from Isidore in the seventh century, Cassiodorus in the sixth century, Augustine in the fourth century, Quintilian in the first century C.E., and Cicero in the first century B.C.E.”, Roger Kimball, “Foundation of the *Artes Liberales*,” in his *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (expanded edition) (N.Y.: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Cf*., Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs The Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2010); Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of Liberal Education* (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 2015; Michael Roth (New Haven: Yale U.P., 2014); and Robert Orrill (ed.), *The Condition of American Liberal Education: Pragmatism and A Changing Tradition* (N.Y.: College Entrance Examination Board, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Of course such challenges are not new, and this model of education has been challenged throughout the cultural tradition. Kimball and Roth artfully trace this history in the works cited in note 4 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Lee McIntire, *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance In The Internet Age* (NY: Routledge, 2015). Kindle version location 3010. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A fuller discussion of the [nature of such an education](http://faculty.fiu.edu/~hauptli/MyViewofTheNatureofALiberalArtsEducation.html) can be found on my web-page. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A Wittgenstenian should be suspicious when she is tempted to define the essence of anything, and a naturalist should be wary of those times when she is tempted to speak about intrinsic values, but there are centrally important aspects of a liberal education which stand out if one pauses to reflect on such educational programs and experiences. What I have to say on this matter is by no means original, and I have borrowed particularly heavily from the *1989-1990 Course Catalog* of my *alma mater*, Lawrence University (Appleton: Lawrence University, 1989). That description of a liberal education is excellent. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Brand Blanshard, “The Uses of A Liberal Education,” in his *The Uses of A Liberal Education* (La Salle: Open Court, 1973), pp. 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 23. Emphasis added to the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Lawrence University’s *Course Catalog, op. cit.,* p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Brand Blanshard, “What Is Education For?”, in his *The Uses of A Liberal Education, op. cit*., p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John Dewey, “The Ethics of Democracy” (1888), reprinted in *John Dewey: The Early Works: Early Essays and Leibniz’ New Essays 1882-1889* v. 1, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: SIU Press, 1969) p. 243; and in *John Dewey: The Political Writings* ed. Debra Morris and Ian Shapiro(Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 59-65, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Martha Nussbaum, Cultivating *Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform In Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1997), p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibid*., p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibid,* pp. 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason, op. cit.,* p. 23. Emphasis added to the passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Martha Nussbaum, Cultivating *Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform In Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard U.P., 1997), p. 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1987), p. 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason, op. cit.,* p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Israel Scheffler, *The Language of Education* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1960), p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Cf*., Renford Bambrough, “Plato’s Political Analogies,” in *Philosophy, Politics, and Society*, ed. P. Lasslet (Oxford: Blackwell, 1956), p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. My *The Reasonableness of Reason: Explaining Rationality Naturalistically* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995) develops an extended defense of the commitment to reason against skeptical and fideistic challenges which contend that such a commitment is arbitrary, unjustified, or only justifiable in a question-begging manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. W.S. Churchill, W.S., *Churchill: His Complete Speeches 1887-1963*, R.R. James (ed.), v. 7 (New York: Chelsa House, 1974), p. 7566. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)