

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## Are the Schools Doing Their Job?

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*Moderator:*

...Now I take pleasure in welcoming to the Town Meeting platform a former colleague and old friend, Dr. Mortimer Adler, of the University of Chicago.

*Dr. Adler:*

In the quarter of a century which has elapsed since John Dewey wrote his famous book on *Democracy and Education*, the essential problem has not changed. But we have changed in our attitude toward the problem. Under the impact of post-war demoralization, made sensitive to social and economic ills by the depression, and sadly frightened by the menace of tyranny in all its totalitarian forms, our people, or at least their education leaders, have become almost hysterical about making education save democracy in America. In educational circles almost nothing else is discussed, certainly not the problem of what constitutes a good education entirely apart from democracy and its present crisis. Some of us are now sufficiently removed from the hysteria of making the world safe for democracy by war to be able to question such means. Perhaps we can also get detached enough to ask whether we must not save education itself from being misused as a kind of counter-propaganda, if we are to preserve the liberal institutions of American life.

I should like to propose the thesis that democracy is a good society insofar as all its institutions respect the integrity, the sanctity of human beings, and aim to help them achieve good lives. We have relearned this truth from the contrast presented by the bad societies in the world today, which make the state itself an absolute end, using

men as mere means, sacrificing human life to false gods. Such bad societies, vicious in principle as well as ruthless in execution, cannot afford to consider education as a means for perfecting men and making them happy. On the contrary, they must use education, as they use other pressures and propaganda, secret police and concentration camps, to make men into political puppets. They misuse education because they misuse men. The basic principle of American democracy—that men have sacred rights above the state—forbids such misuse. Public education serves democracy only through serving the welfare of its citizens, not merely as subjects of the state, but as free men. In fact, unless education makes men free it cannot serve democracy at all.

The question, “What is a good education?” can be answered in two ways; either in terms of what is good for men at any time and place because they are men, or in terms of what is good for men considered only as members of a particular social and political order. My thesis is that the best society is the one in which the two answers are the same. To honor our American institutions, we must believe that the problem of education in our democracy is solved only by determining what is good education for all men everywhere.

I think the answer to the question, “What is a good education?” has long been known and can be briefly summarized. The aim of education is not to create puppets for the state, but to develop to the full all the powers which men have, especially those which are specifically human. The natures men are born with are developed by the habits they form, and education, along with church and home, law and government, seeks to make these habits good rather than bad. Good habits are what used to be called virtues, moral and intellectual, and it used to be said that the aim of a good state is, by law and education, to make men virtuous. The basic point here is that men are rational and that they are free only through the most disciplined exercise of reason. Unless they have good moral habits, they are slaves to their passions and dangerous to their fellows. Unless they have good intellectual habits, reason cannot function well, creatively or critically: This is to say no more than that education must cultivate critical intelligence above all things; it must make men able to think straight about every human problem, and able to act accordingly. As John Dewey has said: “The discipline that is identical with trained power is also identical with freedom. Genuine freedom, in short, is intellectual; it rests in the trained power of thought.”

We are thus led to a corollary of our thesis. Not only is democracy good as a society because it can afford to give men the education

best suited to their human nature; but, further, the best education is one which, in turn, supports democracy itself. Democracy is the society of free men. Democratic government is the political order in which popular sovereignty is most fully realized by the widest participation of all citizens in ruling, as well as being ruled. But this is impossible unless men have been disciplined to use reason, unless their minds are free. When men can be pushed about by propaganda, they are as servile as when they are coerced by brute force. When men are unable to exercise free judgment, they cannot be leaders in public life, nor can they even be followers in the democratic sense of independent subjects. Under the truth that all men are created equal is the basic qualification that men differ in their powers. Even in a democracy there must be both leaders and followers, and democracy cannot endure unless men of both sorts play their different roles freely through trained intelligence. Otherwise, the leaders become demagogues, and the people become the mob they move. Hence we see that the same education which perfects man's rationality is indispensable to democratic life, and inimical to all forms of tyranny and slavery.

The end being clear, what are the means? What is the curriculum which is at once ideal in itself and also the best for democratic citizenship? At this point I most sharply disagree with the existing program of American education, progressive and otherwise, and with proposals currently made by men who call themselves followers of John Dewey. A curriculum in which current events and social studies dominate, in which extra-curricular activities, such as games and hobbies, are given undue importance, in which individual differences are catered to by a chaotic system of electives, neither educates nor liberates. Knowledge of current events and indulgence in self-expression cannot make us free. Only a liberal education liberates, and the essentials of a liberal education are the three R's, by which I mean those basic skills, the mastery of which should be signified by the liberal arts degree. Human beings learn to think clearly and critically by learning to read and listen critically, to write and speak clearly. Only after such basic disciplines have been accomplished by the public school system is there room or time for anything else. Because other things of much less importance have been given first place, almost the whole place, in contemporary education, our students simply cannot read, write, or speak well even after college, and it goes without saying that they cannot think well. Unless we insist upon an education which really educates, we cannot produce a generation able to meet the arduous demands of democratic citizenship. Neglecting the three R's, present education is essentially illiberal. It indoctrinates rather than disciplines or educates.

And even when the doctrines it imposes may be sound democratic ones, it fails to cultivate free judgment because it has forsaken discipline. It leaves its students open to opposite indoctrination by more powerful orators, or, what is worse, to the sway of their own worst passions.

The founding fathers of this republic were liberally educated as no school child is today. The men who wrote and ratified the Constitution knew how to read and write. While we have properly undertaken to make public education more widespread than it was in the eighteenth century, education need not become less liberal as it becomes more universal. At every level and for all elements in the population, the same kind of education—for freedom through discipline—which enabled democracy to take root in this country must be regained if its flowering is to be protected today from the winds of violence abroad in the world.

*Moderator:*

Thank you, Dr. Adler.




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