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A liberal education... frees a man from the prison-house of his class, race, time, place, background, family and even his nation. —Robert M. Hutchins



GREAT IDEAS FROM THE GREAT BOOKS

MORTIMER J. ADLER

PART IV

Questions About Liberal Education and the Great Books

40. WHAT IS LIBERAL EDUCATION?

Dear Dr. Adler,

Isn't a liberal-arts education a luxury that we can ill afford in the present world? Our college students should be studying physics, mathematics, and other sciences instead of philosophy, literature, and music. We need young men and women trained in the sciences, not people who can make interesting conversation about "culture." Is it possible for anyone to defend the value of a liberal education now?

W. W.

Dear W. W.,

Let us first be clear about the meaning of the liberal arts and liberal education. The liberal arts are traditionally intended to develop the faculties of the human mind, those powers of intelligence and imagination without which no intellectual work can be accomplished. Liberal education is not tied to certain academic subjects, such as philosophy, history, literature, music, art, and other so-called "humanities." In the liberal-arts tradition, scientific disciplines, such as mathematics and physics, are considered equally liberal, that is, equally able to develop the powers of the mind.

The liberal-arts tradition goes back to the medieval curriculum. It consisted of two parts. The first part, the *trivium*, comprised grammar, rhetoric, and logic. It taught the arts of reading and writing, of listening and speaking, and of sound thinking. The other part, the *quadrivium*, consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (not audible music, but music conceived as a mathematical science). It taught the arts of observation, calculation, and measurement, how to apprehend the quantitative aspect of things. Nowadays, of course, we would add many more sciences, natural and social. This is just what has been done in the various modern attempts to renew liberal education.

Liberal education, including all the traditional arts as well as the newer sciences, is essential for the development of top-flight scientists. Without it, we can train only technicians, who cannot understand the basic principles behind the motions they perform. We can hardly expect such skilled automatons to make new discoveries of any importance. A crash program of merely technical training would probably end in a crash up for basic science.

The connection of liberal education with scientific creativity is not mere speculation. It is a matter of historical fact that the great German scientists of the nineteenth century had a solid background in the liberal arts. They all went through a liberal education which embraced Greek, Latin, logic, philosophy, and history, in addition to mathematics, physics, and other sciences. Actually, this has been the educational preparation of European scientists down to the present time. Einstein, Bohr, Fermi, and other great modern scientists were developed not by technical schooling, but by liberal education.

Despite all of the ranting and hullabaloo since Sputnik I was propelled into the skies, this has been broadly true of Russian scientists, too. If you will just note the birth dates of the men who have done the basic work in Soviet science, it will be apparent to you that they could not have received their training under any new system of education. As for the present educational setup in the Soviet Union, which many alarmists are demanding that we emulate, it seems to contain something besides technical training and concentration on the natural sciences and mathematics.

The aim of liberal education, however, is not to produce scientists. It seeks to develop free human beings who know how to use their minds and are able to think for themselves. Its primary aim is not the development of professional competence, although a liberal education is indispensable for any intellectual profession. It produces citizens who can exercise their political liberty responsibly. It develops cultivated persons who can use their leisure fruitfully. It is an education for all free men, whether they intend to be scientists or not.

Our educational problem is how to produce free men, not hordes of uncultivated, trained technicians. Only the best liberal schooling can accomplish this. It must include all the humanities as well as mathematics and the sciences. It must exclude all merely vocational and technical training.

41. GENERAL EDUCATION VS. VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Dear Dr. Adler,

There is a continual argument about which is the best type of education—a “general” education in cultural subjects or a “specialized” education in one particular field or occupation. Are both types of education necessary? Or is a general education good for some people, and a vocational education for other people? What are the nature and aims of education?

R. C. M.

Dear R. C. M.,

In the opinion of the ancients, education is the process of developing or perfecting human beings. It tries to cultivate the humanity of man by developing his specifically human excellences—both intellectual and moral. The ultimate goals of education are human happiness and the welfare of society. Its products are good men and good citizens.

If the ancients were asked whether education should be specialized, they would answer that it should be specialized only in that it should be conceived in terms of man’s *specifically* human nature. If they were asked whether it should be vocational, they would say that the only vocation with which it should be concerned is the *common human calling*—the pursuit of happiness. What we call specialized and vocational training—training for particular jobs—they would regard as the training of slaves, not the education of free men.

This classical view of education has prevailed right down to our own century. It is reaffirmed as late as 1916 by none other than John Dewey. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey declares that merely vocational training is the training of animals or slaves. It fits them to become cogs in the industrial machine. Free men need liberal education to prepare them to make a good use of their freedom.

Writing in 1776, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, the English economist Adam Smith advocates a minimum general education for all citizens. He points out that a man who is incapable of using his intellectual faculties properly is not fully human. He describes the stultification of the worker from whom no real craftsmanship or skill is demanded. The division of labor, which

limits him to performing a few simple operations, makes him a mere appendage of the industrial process.

As a result, the worker, according to Adam Smith, “becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human being to become. The torpor of his mind renders him not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any moral judgment concerning many of the ordinary duties of private life.”

Adam Smith’s picture may be unduly grim, and more applicable to the eighteenth than to the twentieth century. But the essential truth it points out remains unchanged. Specialized vocational training which does no more than fit a man for a limited task in the industrial process is as stultifying as the job itself. Such training is, strictly speaking, not education in the human sense at all. It contributes to the production of material goods, not to the development of human beings.

While the ancients had the correct view of education as essentially liberal, they did not think that all men should be liberally educated, because they did not think that all men are fitted by nature for the pursuit of happiness or citizenship or the liberal pursuits of leisure. But we today, at least those of us who are devoted to the principles of democracy, think otherwise. We maintain that all men should be citizens, that all have an equal right to the pursuit of happiness, and that all should be able to enjoy the goods of civilization. Hence we think that a democratic society must provide liberal schooling for all.

Vocational training for particular tasks in the industrial process should be done by industry itself and on the job, not by the schools or in classrooms. The curriculum of basic schooling, from the first grade through college, should be wholly liberal and essentially the same for all. In view of the wide range of abilities and aptitudes with which the schools have to deal, that curriculum must be adapted to different children in different ways.

In other words, we must solve the problem of how to give *all* the children—the least gifted as well as the most gifted—the same kind of liberal education that was given in the past *only to the few*. Upon our success in solving that problem the future of democracy depends.

42. THE PLACE OF MORAL TRAINING IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

Dear Dr. Adler,

Should education be limited to the development of mental skills, or should it have a broader scope? What about physical education, for instance, and what about moral education? Is the cultivation of the moral virtues a proper part of education, or are these “fads and frills,” too?

S. L. T.

Dear S. L. T.,

I have elsewhere argued the merits of a liberal education. (See Chapters 40 and 41.) Such an education develops the intellectual powers and cultivates the basic skills of learning. It prepares the student to become a mature and whole human being and a free and responsible citizen. It provides the preparation for specialized intellectual work and the culture that makes leisure full and fruitful.

Education, however, is not limited to the cultivation of the intellectual powers. The Greeks, to whom we owe our concept of a liberal education, are well aware of this. They believe that education should develop all the human virtues or excellences, the physical and the moral as well as the intellectual. For the Greeks, education had three functions: the development of bodily grace and skill, the formation of moral character, and the cultivation of intellectual understanding.

Plato and Aristotle put the intellectual virtues at the top. In their educational programs, however, they emphasize the moral virtues and the training of the will. They also include physical education in their curriculum—through gymnastics, dancing, and games—for they hold that bodily excellence supports moral and intellectual excellence. They connect soundness, discipline, and harmony in the mind and character with similar qualities in the body.

Moreover, the Greeks do not limit intellectual virtue to abstract reasoning or scientific knowledge. They include among the intellectual virtues art (the capacity to make things) and practical wisdom (the capacity to judge rightly the proper means to achieve good ends in everyday life). Practical wisdom, or “prudence,” is essential to moral life and responsible citizenship. In the Greek view, education’s final goal is the development of a mind which will make right judgments and discern the right order of life.

Although educators have generally agreed that the formation of character is essential in education, they have disagreed about whether moral virtues can be taught in the classroom. Educators know that it is much simpler to teach a student elementary geometry or algebra than to teach him justice, moderation, and patience. We can teach college students ethical theory or the history of ethics, but that will not prevent them from cheating on their examinations—even in ethics.

Learning to be good and to do right is quite different from learning how to read and write and think correctly. Moral virtue is not intellectual perception or practical skill. Character is a quality of the whole person. It is unlikely to be built through memorizing copy-book maxims or listening to sententious moralizing. It seems that moral virtue cannot be taught directly.

Are there any indirect ways?

One long-favored way of developing moral character is the force of example. It may be that of the teacher, parent, or some other elder, or of a great and good character found in history or literature. Many of us remember teachers who communicated something of their own moral substance to us, although they never gave us direct moral instruction.

Also, in the process of learning itself, students are called upon to exercise temperance and fortitude, patience and perseverance; and they, in turn, expect justice and consideration from teachers and administrators. That is why John Dewey feels that moral training might take place in the classroom. Character is formed in the normal learning process, says Dewey, and the qualities elicited are moral virtues. Dewey opposes the separation of moral and intellectual virtues, and, like Socrates, considers moral virtue a form of knowledge that can be taught, though indirectly.

43. WISDOM AS THE GOAL OF LIBERAL LEARNING

Dear Dr. Adler,

What is wisdom? Is it a matter of intellect or experience? Is it theoretical knowledge or practical “savvy”? Why do we call a man “wise”?

W. P. S.

Dear W. P. S.,

In our common speech we call a man wise either because he shows good judgment in the practical affairs of life, or because he has deep insight into the ultimate principles and causes of things. The term “wisdom” has both moral and intellectual significance for us today, as it has had throughout our tradition.

The ancient Greeks conceive of two kinds of wisdom—practical wisdom, or “prudence,” and speculative or philosophical wisdom. They consider a man *practically* wise if he judges situations correctly and chooses the means best suited to secure his objectives. Aristotle, however, insists that the objectives must be morally good. In his view, practical wisdom is linked with moral virtue.

The Greeks consider a man *philosophically* wise if he understands the first principles or causes of things. Wisdom in this sense is the highest form of knowledge. It is the culmination of man’s pursuit of truth. It gives him the peace that accompanies perfect fulfillment. Plotinus states that wisdom brings perfect repose, for it is the knowledge for which our mind has sought. And Samuel Johnson notes that “the philosophically wise man” has no needs, for he is complete.

Our religious tradition places a high value on wisdom. The Greeks consider it a divine attribute. Socrates says that God alone is wise and that man can love or seek wisdom but he cannot possess it. The Book of Proverbs extols wisdom as an eternal principle that sustains and guides the physical order and human life.

The Bible also praises as wisdom the prudent and righteous conduct of everyday affairs, and the astute and just decrees of rulers. Here again wisdom is both a kind of knowledge and an aspect of moral character. But here God is the teacher, and wisdom is attained by listening to his teaching—not by intellectual inquiry alone.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,” says the Bible. In this context, “fear” means hearkening to God’s word. Aquinas explains that this is a filial, not a servile, fear—a true respect for the divine law, not dread of punishment. It rests on faith in God’s revelation of His will to man. And it ends in wisdom, the perfection of the intellect that accompanies perfect love. For Spinoza, wisdom is a form of love, “the intellectual love of God.”

How do we attain wisdom? Wisdom is the ultimate aim of learning. Such learning is a long process, which involves a lifetime of

thoughtful inquiry and wide experience. Book learning and good schooling help, but they are not enough to form this supreme virtue of mind and character.

Yet experience and age alone are not the sole passports to wisdom. Some men remain foolish all their life long. Indeed, few men sustain the effort and have the devotion that are required to become wise. These few wise men teach the rest of us what wisdom is and what it means to be wise.

44. THE ROLE OF MANUAL WORK IN THE LIFE OF LEARNING

Dear Dr. Adler,

Are intellectual pursuits and manual labor utterly opposed to one another? Some people have tried to combine learning and labor. Farming the land especially has been considered a fitting complement of intellectual work, and associated with many spiritual virtues.

P. H.

Dear P. H.,

Your letter raises two questions: one about the relation of labor to learning, and one about the spiritual value of agricultural pursuits.

As to the first and more general problem, the classical Greek tradition looks down on all forms of manual work as servile, in contrast to purely intellectual activities which it regards as liberal. "Those occupations are the meanest," Aristotle writes, "in which the body is most deteriorated, the most servile in which there is the greatest use of the body, and the most illiberal in which there is the least need of excellence."

On the other hand, the Talmudic Rabbis linked the dignity of manual labor with the holiness of learning. They required their students to learn a trade, and usually worked at one themselves. They held that manual labor is man's divinely appointed task in this world, and that it teaches humility, patience, industriousness, and self-reliance.

Some of the Christian monastic orders have practiced a life of work and prayer in a tradition that comes down to the present day. Their work often includes the cultivation of both the soil and the mind. The Reformation movements taught that man's work was his

divinely appointed vocation, or “calling,” whether he was an artisan or a minister of God. In modern America such colleges as Berea, Black Mountain, Antioch, and Goddard have linked labor and learning.

As to the more specific question about the spiritual value of working the land, the idyllic quality of rural life was praised in ancient Rome, as against the complexity and corruption of urban civilization. Since the eighteenth century and the rise of industrialism, many modern thinkers have voiced this doctrine. The physiocrats, a school of eighteenth-century French economists, hold that only agriculture and mining provide the proper types of economic activity for a sound social order. The political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau also extolled a life close to nature, as against the corruption and artificiality of civilized society.

Our own Thomas Jefferson said that “those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God.” He maintained that the cultivation of the soil fosters moral virtue and self-reliance, whereas the mechanical arts promote a venal dependence on others, which he thought fatal to a republican form of government. He advocated that the United States should become a purely agrarian society and import manufactured goods.

Jefferson’s sentiments have been echoed by other American writers. Henry Thoreau said that we must “see man as an inhabitant, or a parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.” He himself worked his little farm while he engaged in intellectual and literary activity. Walt Whitman wrote paeans to the pioneers and the farmers who were building the new America.

In addition to the moral value that has been attributed to contact with the soil, another element should be pointed out: farming is a very special art, indeed. It is akin to two other arts—healing and teaching—which have a high place in the scale of human work. The special character of these three useful arts derives from the fact that the farmer, the physician, and the teacher work with living things and cooperate with their natures to produce good results. In contrast, other arts, such as carpentry and shoemaking or painting and sculpture, work with passive materials which they shape and transform.

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Allan Blackman

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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