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Mortimer Adler in front of John Stuart Mill's residence in Kensington Square, London - September 1974

LIBERAL EDUCATION, THEN AND NOW

J.S. Mill's idea of a university, and our own.

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III. LIBERAL EDUCATION AND MILL'S LARGER LIBERALISM

The central importance to Mill's idea of a liberal education of drawing truth from rival systems of opinions and goods reflects the spirit of the larger liberalism to which his voluminous writings are devoted. For example, in *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), he seeks to give both the free market and government intervention

their due. In *On Liberty*, he shows how the formation and flourishing of free individuals depend on the discipline of virtue, education, the family, and civil society. In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1862), he emphasizes the need both for a party of order, whose main tasks are to maintain the basic framework within which political life takes place and to conserve what society has achieved, and a party of progress, whose guiding purpose is to implement more fully a free society's promise of liberty and equality under the law. In *The Subjection of Women* (1869), he makes an impassioned case for the formal equality of women while respecting differences between the sexes. And in his *Essays on Religion* (1874), which Mill chose to have published posthumously, he seeks to give expression to a religious sensibility that respects the power as well as the limits of reason.⁷

But nowhere does he more forcefully demonstrate the practical and theoretical necessity of combining presumed contraries than in his tributes to the progressive rationalist Jeremy Bentham (1838) and the conservative romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1840), which Mill published while editor of the *London and West Minster Review*.⁸ To appreciate the audacity of his contention that both the thought of Bentham and the thought of Coleridge are essential, imagine a contemporary progressive intellectual declaring in a left-of-center journal that, say, both John Rawls and Allan Bloom are indispensable thinkers of our age.

In Mill's judgment, Bentham's progressive rationalism was blind to the intricacies of human affairs. But in part because of that blindness, Bentham was able to focus his intellectual energies, expose much nonsense in the common language used to discuss morals and politics, and bring to light inefficiencies and injustices in the organization of social and political life. At the same time, Coleridge's conservative romanticism, Mill contended, was blind to the positive features of modern society and to the advantages of modern systematic empirical inquiry. But, again, in part because of that blindness, Coleridge could concentrate on discerning the wisdom embodied in traditional practices and on making vivid the shared values and social bonds on which political life, even liberal and democratic political life, depended. Through his appreciation of their strengths and weaknesses, Mill aims to demonstrate the necessity of the progressive and conservative minds, and the superiority to both of the liberal mind.

In his tribute to Coleridge, Mill observes that the manner in which Bentham and Coleridge each supplied an essential perspective lacking in the other illustrated "the importance, in the present im-

perfect state of mental and social science, of antagonist modes of thought.” Lest one think that Mill wrote in the expectation that anytime soon such need would diminish, he instead looks forward to when it “will one day be felt” that antagonist modes of thought “are as necessary to one another in speculation, as mutually checking powers are in a political constitution.” In fact, this necessity is enduring, and for good reason. It is not grounded in “indifference between one opinion and another,” but rather in the irreducible diversity of knowledge’s sources and the abiding process of comparing and contesting ideas by which truth comes to light.

Twenty-five years before he delivered his St. Andrews address and sketched the liberal education that can be seen as a fortification against it, Mill warned in his tribute to Coleridge of “the besetting danger” to which moral and political understanding was subject:

All students of man and society who possess that first requisite for so difficult a study, a due sense of its difficulties, are aware that the besetting danger is not so much of embracing falsehood for truth, as of mistaking part of the truth for the whole. It might be plausibly maintained, that in almost every one of the leading controversies, past or present, in social philosophy, both sides were in the right in what they affirmed, though wrong in what they denied and that, if either could have been made to take the other’s views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct.

This suggests a test to determine whether the education a university provides is liberal in the large sense. It is to be expected, and indeed welcomed, given differences in background, talents, and tastes, that some students will, on reflection, become progressives and some conservatives. But universities that purport to provide a liberal education will be failing in their mission unless their graduates, progressives and conservatives alike, prove capable of sympathetically understanding the positions of the political party to which they do not belong and discerning what is true and enduring in the beliefs of their partisan opponents.

For Mill, the virtues cultivated by a liberal education sustained a higher form of toleration. Of course the political toleration involved in suffering the expression of an opinion one knows to be false or foolish is indispensable to liberty of thought and discussion in a free society. But respecting a person’s right to be wrong is not the only form of toleration. Respecting a person’s right to be right about truths one is inclined to find awkward or disconcerting is

imperative to the flourishing of thought and discussion in a free society. A liberal education transforms this imperative into a pleasure.

IV. REFORMING THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY UNIVERSITY

Mill's nineteenth-century analysis of liberal education is relevant to the twenty-first-century university not for the specific curriculum he proposes but because of the larger principles he outlines and the greater goods he clarifies. His analysis suggests several lessons. First, a liberal education aims to liberate the mind by furnishing it with literary, historical, scientific, and philosophical knowledge and by cultivating its capacity to question and answer on its own. Second, a liberal education must, in significant measure, provide not a smorgasbord of offerings but a shared content, because knowledge is cumulative and ideas have a history. Third, a liberal education must adapt to local realities, providing the elementary instruction, the stepping stones to higher stages of understanding, where grade school and high school education fail to perform their jobs. Fourth, the aim of a liberal education is not to achieve mastery in any one subject but an understanding of what mastery entails in the several main fields of human learning and an appreciation of the interconnections among the fields. Fifth, liberal education is not an alternative to specialization, but rather a sound preparation for it. Sixth, a liberal education culminates in the study of ethics, politics, and religion, studies which naturally begin with the near and familiar, extend to include the faraway and foreign, and reach their peak in the exploration, simultaneously sympathetic and critical, of the history of great debates about justice, faith, and reason. Seventh, all of this will be for naught if teaching is guided by the partisan or dogmatic spirit, so professors must be cultivated who will bring to the classroom the spirit of free and informed inquiry.

What might a four-year curriculum for a liberal education, devised in accordance with these lessons, look like? No doubt a variety of reasonable answers is possible, particularly in a nation as large and diverse as the United States, in which students can choose among private research universities, small liberal arts colleges, state universities of many sizes and descriptions, and religious colleges. And owing to differences in aptitude and interest, a liberal education will not be for everybody. Nevertheless, some elements are simple and straightforward and will be common to all colleges and universities that wish to provide students a liberal education wor-

thy of the name. For starters, in view of the sorry state of high school and grade school education in the country,⁹ the curriculum will need to contain a large remedial element. In view of the need created by our advanced economy for depth or specialization, the curriculum will continue to require students to choose a major to concentrate in during their last two years. Most importantly, in view of the need for breadth, or knowledge of the civilization of which one is a part and of other civilizations, the curriculum should have a solid core.

As with the other parts of the curriculum, the structure and content of the core will be subject to legitimate dispute and reasoned compromise. Also, as with the rest of the curriculum, the core must strike a balance between the realities of education in America and the enduring imperatives of liberal education. It should not revolve around any single one of the main models for a core curriculum—general distribution requirements, great books, survey courses, or the modes of inquiry approach—but should partake of elements of all four.¹⁰ And it should not suppose that there is one right path or a single correct syllabus for the courses it contains. But faculty should fashion common core courses whose purpose is to awaken interest, sharpen critical thinking, and provide students with a shared store of essential knowledge and fundamental questions.

As it happens, crafting a core consistent with the demands of a liberal education will involve both a substantial break with today's university curriculum and a long overdue alignment of higher education with common sense. Such a core would, for example, require all students to take a semester course surveying Greek and Roman history, one surveying modern European history, and one surveying American history. It would require all students to take a semester course in great works of European literature and one in American literature. It would require all students to take a semester course in biology and one in physics. It would require all students to demonstrate proficiency in a foreign language by carrying on a casual conversation and accurately reading a newspaper in the language, a level of proficiency usually obtainable after two years of study or four semester courses. It would require all students to take a semester course in the principles of American government, one in general economics, and one in the history of political philosophy. It would require all students to take a semester course comparing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And it would require all students to take a semester course of their choice in the history, literature, or religion of a non-Western civilization.


Such a core is at best an introduction to liberal education. Still, students who met its requirements would also have acquired a common intellectual foundation that would enhance their understanding of whatever specialization they chose, improve their ability to debate politics responsibly, and enrich their appreciation of the delightful and dangerous world in which they live.

It is a mark of the clutter of our current curriculum and the confusion that it spreads that these requirements will strike many faculty and administrators, and perhaps also students, as so onerous as to be a nonstarter for a serious discussion about curricular reform. Yet assuming four courses a semester and 32 to graduate, such a core could be completed in the first two years of undergraduate study. Students who met the foreign language requirement through high school study would have time left over in their first two years for four elective courses. Moreover, the core would still allow students during their junior and senior years to choose their own major, devote ten courses to it, and take six additional elective courses. And for students majoring in the natural sciences, where it is necessary to take a strict and lengthy sequence of courses, options should be available to enroll in introductory and lower level courses in one's major during freshman and sophomore year and complete the core during junior and senior year.

Nevertheless, reform confronts formidable obstacles. The principal one is professors.¹¹ Many will fight such a common core because it would require them to teach classes outside their area of expertise or reduce the number of students for boutique classes on highly specialized topics. Moreover, one can expect protracted battles over the content of the social science and humanities component of the core of the sort that eventually led Yale to return that \$20 million gift that was meant to support study of Western civilization. Meanwhile, as I have noted, students and parents are poorly positioned to effect change. Students come and go in four years, and, in any event, the understanding they need to make the arguments for reform is acquired through the very liberal education of which they are currently being deprived. Meanwhile, parents are far away and otherwise occupied and have too much money on the line to rock the boat.

But there are opportunities for those who will seize them. Change could be led by an intrepid president, provost, or dean of a major university who knows the value of a liberal education, possesses the eloquence to defend it to his or her faculty and the public, and has the skill and clout to wield institutional incentives on behalf of reform.¹² Change could also be led by trustees and alumni at pri-

vate universities who acquire larger roles in university governance and by alumni who connect their donations to reliable promises from universities that their gifts will be used in furtherance of liberal education, well understood. And, not least, some enterprising smaller college or public university, taking advantage of the nation's love of diversity and its openness to innovation, might discover a market niche for parents and students eager for an education that serves students' long-term interests by introducing them in a systematic manner to the ideas and events that formed their civilization, the moral and political principles on which their nation and those of other nations are based, and languages and civilizations that differ from their own.

Reforming the university is as urgent as the obstacles to it are formidable. Citizens today confront a mind-boggling array of hard questions concerning, among other things, the balance of liberty and security at home; war and peace in faraway lands; the challenges some civilizations face in achieving liberty and democracy and others face in promoting them; the extent of the public's responsibility for the poor, the sick, and the elderly; management of the extraordinary powers science provides for caring for, and manipulating, nascent human life, the unborn, and the frail and failing; the worldwide threats to the environment and appropriate national and transnational measures to combat them; the impact of popular culture on private conduct; the meaning of marriage and the structure of the family; and the proper relation between religion and politics. No citizen can be expected to master all the issues. But liberal democracies count on more than a small minority's acquiring the ability to reason responsibly about the many sides of these many-sided questions. For this reason, liberal democracies depend on colleges and universities' supplying their students a liberal education. Today's educators could scarcely find a better way to begin to recover an understanding of the aim of a liberal education and their obligation to provide it than by studying John Stuart Mill's Inaugural delivered to the University of St. Andrews in 1867. 

Notes

⁷ This section draws on Peter Berkowitz, "When Liberalism Was Young," *Claremont Review of Books*, Summer 2006.

⁸ Both appear in *Essays on Ethics, Religion, and Society*, J.M. Robson, ed. (University of Toronto Press, 1969).

[9](#) “A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education,” a Report of the Commission Appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings (September 2006), 7–8.

[10](#) For a discussion of these and their limitations, see Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 255–280.

[11](#) See also Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 31–57, 313–320, 323–325, 334.

[12](#) See also Bok, *Our Underachieving Colleges*, 335–343.

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